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THE WOLF

BY

J. E. BUCKROSE pseud.

Author of "The Wood End," "The Toll Bar," etc.

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To
MY MOTHER

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THE WOLF

CHAPTER I

SUSAN DREWERY had been sewing all the week at the Wood Farm, but now she stood in the stuffy bedroom fitting on Mrs. Farrow's gown for the last time.

Both she and the farmer's wife, and the home-coming horses outside, had the pleasantest sense that to-morrow would be Sunday; a time when tired arms relax, and tired fingers know that exquisite pleasure of doing nothing, which is kept, by a most humane Providence, for the working folk.

Mrs. Farrow looked at herself in the glass and wept.

"I'm sure I've done my best," said the dressmaker, naturally disturbed. She was white and jaded with stitching through the hot July days, but not dispirited, because everything lay before her still, and she was young and healthy.

"Oh, I know you've done *your* best," whimpered Mrs. Farrow, "but I've been accustomed to shop-made clothes for swell occasions all my life, and I feel as if I couldn't bear to have the gown for my own niece's wedding made in the house."

"It is hard," said Susy uncomfortably. "I know you've had a bad year with your lambs."

"We've had a bad year all round," replied Mrs. Farrow, searching round for a handkerchief; not finding it she wiped her nose and eyes on a spare piece of lining. "But perhaps I was too proud; I wanted taking down, maybe. So I must just look on this green cashmere as my cross."

Susy flushed at hearing the fierce effort of three whole hot days described as a "cross," and the irritability of extreme fatigue overcame her.

"Well, you look thinner in it, anyway, than you did in your last silk from Parker's of Market Yarborough," she retorted. "That made you look like a chicken with the pip, all gathered up on the bodice and scanty in the skirt."

"My girl," said Mrs. Farrow, with dignity, "when you come to my time of life you'll know that a fine bust is more admired by the gentlemen than anything else. Mr. Farrow always considered that silk gown set off my figure; but you've a lot to learn."

"I'm sorry I was hasty," said Susy, her little spurt of irritability passing over as soon as the words were spoken. "It's a pity you don't like your dress."

She began wearily to gather up her fashion papers into a little bag with her scissors and needles, and Mrs. Farrow's kind heart was touched at once by the girl's tired voice and attitude.

"There!" she exclaimed, "I forgot about your feelings with thinking so much about my own. I never meant to cast any reflections on you, Miss Drewery, I'm sure. It's only the come-down of it all

that cuts me, and the thought that my sister-in-law will be at the wedding next week in a black-figured brocade that cost six pounds, if it cost a penny, though there was a day when she was only too glad of my cast-offs. But since they started that butcher's shop there's no holding them. My word, butcher's meat is the stuff to pay when you don't grow it!"

"You'll look as nice as anybody," comforted Susy, gathering up the little bag and starting for the door.

Mrs. Farrow stopped her.

"Miss Drewery," she asked solemnly, "can you truly say that I look my best in this—the very best I ever *could* look?"

Now, if the reply had been "Yes," Mrs. Farrow would not have believed it, but, such is the queerness of human nature, she would have felt comforted. Susy, however, was in her way a sort of artist, so she could never think anything she had done was the very best, because what she had hoped to do was always infinitely better.

"No," she was obliged to hesitate at that, "you *might* have had a dress to suit you exactly, but I haven't managed it, I know; I couldn't get it just right—I'm not experienced enough."

"Aye, it's the want of trimming on that skirt," sighed Mrs. Farrow, as she stood at the door, watching her dressmaker depart. "I oughtn't to have let myself be overruled about that second flounce."

Then, as it was very cool there, a pleasant thought struck Mrs. Farrow.

"Wait a minute," she called, "and I'll set you as far as the river-bank."

Susy stood patiently under the apple trees until the farmer's wife came up to her.

"It's nice out," said Mrs. Farrow, drawing a long breath. "I never get a walk from one week's end to another. Now my sister that lives in Market Yarborough is always tramping round for the good of her health. My boy lives there, you know, in school time, and goes to the Grammar School. That's how I know. I suppose you heard about the kick-up there was last term with one of the masters, didn't you?"

"You mean Mark Branscombe?" said Susy, with a certain consciousness.

"Yes. Old Branscombe's son, who got a scholarship and went to Cambridge. It's well that old Mr. and Mrs. Branscombe died years ago, and can't know how their son has been turned away from his situation in disgrace; though I, for one, don't blame him. He only struck a lad himself instead of asking the headmaster to use the cane, and what's that?"

"But the boy's father was Mayor and Chairman of the Grammar School Committee, and fit to burst with pride at getting on so from being a little grocer," said Susy. "He knew, too, that Mark had wished to have his son expelled, and wasn't likely to let such a chance slip."

"Well, we other parents were obliged to side with the Mayor," answered Mrs. Farrow importantly. "You couldn't have that sort of thing going on if you knew about it; still I'm sorry for Mark Branscombe. They say he'll have hard work to find another situation."

"Somebody told me that Mr. Hamilton had taken the matter up—Mr. Hamilton of Saltmarsh," said Susy.

"Um. He'll do nobody's cause any good with the Market Yarborough Corporation," said Mrs. Farrow.

"Why not?" asked Susy. "He's a well-known man and a good master."

Mrs. Farrow pursed her lips.

"I could tell you tales," she said, "but they're best left untold."

This excellent and time-honoured way of making up for a lack of definite information impressed Susy more than any amount of detail.

"He looks all right," she said. "I never spoke to him, but he looks rather a fine sort of gentleman."

"They always do," responded Mrs. Farrow darkly, then she turned to go home again.

Susy had reached the long river bank by now, which led from the Wood Farm to Suddaby village, and when the sound of Mrs. Farrow's footsteps died away there was perfect silence; that breathing, growing, tender silence which is the greatest rest in all the world. You could almost hear the mushrooms pushing up through the grass on the low pastures to the left, and the scent of wild mint, the water forget-me-nots blue-grey in the dusk like shadowy spirits of forget-me-nots, the stunted willow here and there under which the trout lay hidden, all hushed Susy as dear familiar things do that one has not to notice.

After a little while, the hurry and bustle of the past week at the Wood Farm began to fade into

nothingness, that tiresome collar of Mrs. Farrow's dress slipped back into the past, and Susy began to make the sort of gowns that she invariably did make on her way home on a Saturday night. They were always suited to a tallish girl with brown hair and eyes, with a merry look, and a mouth which curved up a little at the corners, and the favourite gown was of green silk, all shimmering and shining.

At last she came to the bridge where the cattle crossed to and from the village, and there she met a woman who was going to buy the weekly groceries at her aunt's little shop, so they walked along together, and the talk fell again upon Mark Branscombe and the disturbance at the Grammar School. The *Market Yarborough Herald* that Saturday was full of it, because there were no thunderstorms, nor cattle plagues, nor even abnormally large vegetable marrows, to fill in the odd spaces; also the Mayor had written a letter signed imperially, "E. S. Market Yarborough," his name being Ezra Smith.

Susy tried to turn the conversation, but might as well have tried to drain the river, and she was glad to reach the little shop, standing sideways to the road, with its long garden that stretched to the blacksmith's forge. The square board above the back door bore the inscription:

"ANN DIMSDALE, GROCER AND GENERAL DEALER
LICENSED TO SELL TOBACCO,"

and Miss Dimsdale herself was weighing out a quarter of tea.

"Just count out a ha'po'th of biscuits for Tommy Jones," said she hastily to her niece, in a tone of stress, for she liked to fancy herself pressed for time on a Saturday night, and rejoiced when a bead of perspiration bedewed her bald forehead—that was a sign of being tremendously "throng."

But by nine o'clock the village street was so snug and silent, with lights appearing now in upper windows, that she had to recognise hard fact and lock the door of the shop until Monday morning.

She and Susy retired into the living portion of the house, which fronted upon the long garden running beside the high road, and she cast an eye round the spotless kitchen to see that everything was in order for Sunday.

"Bless my soul!" she exclaimed, "if I haven't forgot the beans. You must go out and pull them now, Susy."

"I'll get them first thing in the morning," said Susy, sitting down wearily.

"Here, give me the basket," cried Miss Dimsdale, "I'll get them myself, tired as I am. Do you think I'd have beans pulled in full view of the road on a Sunday morning? I haven't come to *that* yet, thank God!"

Susy gathered herself together and sprang up.

"Nonsense, aunt; of course I can do it all right. I was only a bit tired."

"Young folks are always tired now; they weren't in my time," said Miss Dimsdale.

All the same she went out to help, and the two women stood together in the dusk gathering the

crisp, green pods which they could scarcely see. It was all so quiet that the footsteps of two passing men sounded quite loudly along the village street, and every word they spoke was distinct and clear.

A peculiar voice, assertive and yet vaguely charming, said very deliberately:

"It's a damned shame!"

And another—much younger—very fresh and gay, in spite of a certain momentary bitterness, answered:

"Well, it's done for my career as a schoolmaster, and I'm fit for nothing else."

Then the steps paused, and the younger voice called out: "Good-night, Miss Dimsdale."

"Good-night, Mr. Branscombe," answered she, looking up from her basket. "Pleasant weather for the time of year."

"Looks like a fine harvest," said the assertive voice, almost as if the fact of his saying so must *make* it fine, but with a charm that almost led the listener to believe it too.

"Indeed, sir," responded Miss Dimsdale, with great reserve; then she went on with her bean picking, very angry that something had impelled her to say "sir," because she held herself a step above that, being the daughter of a respectable farmer long deceased.

Susy did not go on with her bean picking, but came across the garden and gave her hand to the younger man over the hedge.

"How do you do, Mr. Branscombe?" she said, rather shyly.

"Quite well, thank you; how are you?" answered

Mark Branscombe, sticking to the Suddaby formula, as he always did in moments of embarrassment, for he felt so anxious to say something fine to Susy that nothing came but what he knew by heart. Then, in the pause that followed, he remembered his companion. "This is Mr. Hamilton," he concluded.

George Hamilton looked over the hedge where sweet-briar mingled with the hawthorne, and Susy's face came through the dusk to his eyes as a primrose might to a man on a desert journey, as fresh and sweet and homelike.

He took the hand she gave him, supple and yet roughened by good work, and fresh with the dew from the bean-rows, and it seemed to link him with all the quiet joys he could never know. So, for the sake of them, and because of a sort of royal sense he had that what he did must look right, he touched her hand lightly with his lips, paying his homage thus to the spirit of home and wifehood and motherhood.

But Susy, of course, did not understand this, nor Mark—happily Miss Dimsdale did not see it; and a most uncomfortable constraint fell upon the two young people.

"Well, good-night," said Susy, angry and oddly ashamed.

"Good-night," answered the two men, going off down the quiet street.

"Good riddance," said Miss Dimsdale, looking after them. "You needn't think, Susy, that Mark Branscombe means anything by hanging after you as he does when he comes to lodge in Suddaby

He'd no more think of marrying you than he would of marrying the servant girl at the 'Dog and Duck.'"

"Branscombe's were no better than Drewery's," said Susy. "They were all farmers together."

"*Were*," said Miss Dimsdale. "But *were's* nothing. It's what folk's are now that matters, and Mark Branscombe's been to Cambridge and mixes with gentlemen like Mr. Hamilton, who is a gentleman in spite of everything. Branscombe is only having his fun with you, just remember that."

Without replying, Susy lifted the basket and walked very erect down the little grass path, Miss Dimsdale followed with a pleasant sense of having put things on their proper footing—she would have tried to manage the Universe if she could have got at it—and the door was closed and barred for the night. The rest of the village lay in darkness, only the "Dog and Duck" still showed lighted windows on the ground floor, and the dew fell silently on the little clustered houses like a Saturday night's benediction.

Hamilton and Mark reached the inn just at closing time, and the landlord stood outside breathing in the fresh air.

"Stop," said Mark, at the yard gate, for they had not spoken since leaving Susy, each being occupied with his own thoughts. "I want to ask you something. Why did you kiss her — Miss Drewery's hand?"

Hamilton started; he had forgotten all about his companion, but now he bent a keen look at the

young man's face, which was lighted by a ray from the open inn doorway.

"Oh," he said slowly, "so that's it, is it? Well, you needn't mind, Branscombe. I was only saluting in your friend the woman I can never marry."

"I'm a jealous fool," said Mark, seized with quick compunction. "You see—I—I—it's in this way—I can't help thinking everybody else must fall in love with her."

"But I stand outside of matrimony, you know," laughed Hamilton; "and no one," he added gravely, "would offer Miss Drewery anything less than that: he would want her for the mother of his children. His hold on the generations yet to come would be made strong and vital through her—man's only hold."

As he concluded, Hamilton did not utter the faintest sound which could be construed into a sigh, and yet Mark felt, somehow, as if the summer's night were full of sighing.

"There are lots of other holds on posterity," he answered; "fame and—"

But Hamilton was so obviously not listening that his voice tailed off into silence, and the landlord came towards them with his comfortable air, that said, as plain as words: "All's well with this world, and don't bother about the next—*it's* sure to be all right."

"Splendid night for your ride, Mr. Hamilton," he said. "Jim's just brought your horse round. You won't get finer nights than this in foreign parts?"

"No," said Hamilton, springing into the saddle; "but they suit me better, I think. Good-night.

Good-night, Branscombe. See you on Monday morning, then?"

"Eleven o'clock sharp. Good-night," answered Branscombe.

Then rider and horse vanished into the pleasant dusk—it never grows quite dark on a high summer night at Suddaby—and the three men were left behind in the stream of lamplight which fell through the inn doorway.

"You'd never think there was anything wrong with him," said the landlord, rubbing his three chins.

"Seems as sane as you or me," said the ostler, with a vacant chuckle.

"There is no reason to suppose that Mr. Hamilton must be mad, or will go mad, because his father did," said Mark indignantly.

"Ay," chuckled the old ostler, "and his grandfather did, and his great-grandmother—they both went crazy, too, before they died—I've often heard tell of it. My grandmother remembered seeing old Mrs. Hamilton when she was a little lass in service at Saltfleet. A fine, stately lady for all the talk—"

"Let the dead lie, Jim," said Mark. "That lady's gone where it can't matter to you nor me who or what she was."

"Besides, nobody knows," added the landlord comfortably. "Have a glass of beer, as a friend, Mr. Branscombe?"

For he too had heard of the trouble at the Grammar School, and wished to show sympathy; besides, he was very eager to glean further details, and the beer did not cost him what he charged for it.

"No thanks, I must be getting back to my lodgings," said Mark.

"Well, if you must," said the landlord, sorry to hear no fresh news, but dwelling, like a true philosopher, on the fact that he'd saved his beer.

So the "Dog and Duck," too, soon grew hushed and dim, like the rest of Suddaby. Mark's window alone in all the village had a light in it, as if he watched over the little quiet place while his lady slept, though he was only choosing a necktie to wear at church next morning, being unable to decide whether she would like him best in blue with white spots or black with a violet line.

CHAPTER II

SUNDAY peace has been driven away, like the fairies, from most places, but it still broods pleasantly over Suddaby village, so when Susy opened the door that morning and looked down the long, narrow garden, every flower and leaf and blade of grass spoke to her, saying, "God is good"; not in any fixed word, or even thought, but with that absolute assurance which comes to a child when its mother is in the room.

And nearly everybody under the low roofs of the houses dressed with the unconscious hope that a kindness in the eyes of somebody else would make them better than they really were; not a young fellow, from Mark to the boy at the inn, but tied his necktie in the belief that somebody would care: not a girl, from Susy to the last little drab in the village, but felt it would matter to somebody how she looked. That is why the real, awful loneliness of towns can never come to a spot like Suddaby. There is always someone to *care*, if only to condemn, on a Sunday morning.

Of course Susy did not put on her fresh church-going gown until after breakfast, because there were all sorts of things to be done in the house; but both she and her aunt were down some minutes before

the church bell began to ring, their cold dinner laid all ready, save for the meat, upon the kitchen table.

"That blue cotton's made up nicely," said Miss Dimsdale, pulling down her veil which was strained very tightly across her long nose, and settling her black kid gloves. "It was good of Ada to send you the piece of stuff—but what's it to her? My word, how she has got on since she went to London."

"I sometimes wish I'd gone to her when she wrote and asked me," said Susy. "She offered me good terms for a start, or Parkinson & Diver's did through her. It was a splendid chance that I shall not get again in a hurry."

"Well," answered Miss Dimsdale reluctantly, "she did mention it again only last week, but I thought it was a pity to unsettle you. You'd better stop here until you get married."

"Chance is a bonny thing," laughed Susy.

"Oh, you don't want for chances," said Miss Dimsdale, locking the door and putting the key under the scraper. "There's Jones the auctioneer, with a grand house in Yarborough, only waiting for you to look his way. He as good as told me so."

"Jones, with his red face and his bandy legs!" ejaculated Susy.

"You think yourself lucky if you come to nothing worse than Jones," retorted Miss Dimsdale; then she was joined by a neighbour to whom she talked with an odd mincing propriety, quite different to her ordinary manner in the shop on week-days.

After church, Mark hurried out so as to be in the

path when Susy should go down it. Miss Dimsdale, with an elderly friend, came first, then a stream of other people who seemed tiresome because they were not Susy; and finally a little group of girls stood up against the gloom of the old church porch. They smiled and glowed there, very sweet and fresh, and Mark watched Susy, as a young man should, with a feeling that she was too good for him, and yet was tender enough—perhaps—

As he went forward to greet her, he caught a momentary glimpse of Hamilton's face between the tall yews of the further hedge. It was not as Mark knew it, gay, careless, with a sort of supreme assurance; it was Hamilton's face as he himself knew it—tragic—with eyes that gazed from beyond the pale at what he could never have.

"Mr. Hamilton," cried Mark, starting forward.

But he had disappeared.

"You seem very much taken up with Mr. Hamilton," said Susy, as they walked along with Miss Dimsdale close at hand.

"He's been exceedingly kind," said Mark, who was embarrassed by Miss Dimsdale's hawk-like gaze, and longed for a word alone with Susy. Perhaps Susy may have guessed this, or it may have been only a fortunate accident that caused her prayer-book to fall to the ground.

"Shall you be walking on the river bank this afternoon?" whispered Mark.

Susy answered nothing then; but about half-past two she put on her best hat, and remarked that she was going out for a breath of air.

"You can breathe in an older hat than that," remarked Miss Dimsdale, "but I suppose it's no use talking to you. There'll come a day when you'll pray for Jones on your bended knees, if you don't mind, and you'll not get him."

"I'd sooner die!" said Susy, flinging out with a swish of cotton skirts.

She went very quickly across the meadow, and over a little foot-bridge, not by the ordinary way for fear she should meet any of the village girls, and stood for a moment on the further bank wishing she had not come. Then she caught sight of Mark waiting far down the river-side, near the larger bridge, and changed her mind.

"I've been staring my eyes out for a glimpse of a blue frock ever since two o'clock," said Mark breathlessly, as he came up with her.

"You couldn't be sure I should walk this way," answered Susy quickly.

"No; I only hoped," said Mark, looking very hard at the pretty lips which were speaking. "It seemed too good to be true, but I hoped—"

Then a silence fell. After wanting so much to be together neither of them knew what to say, because they could not tell each other what they were thinking of. How could Mark say—You've the sweetest lips in all the world. Or how could Susy say—Are you going to tell me how you love me—are you? But that is what they were thinking.

And as people under those conditions do not look very carefully where they walk, it is not surprising that Susy's skirt caught and tore on a bramble-briar

with a little sharp sound which aroused them both to a sense of the outer world again.

"Oh," cried Susy, "right across the front breadth, and it was new on this morning." Then she recovered herself. "Never mind, it's only a cheap cotton," she added.

"It's the loveliest gown I ever saw," said Mark, on his knees, taking away the bramble-briar.

But he really meant *you* are the loveliest, and she knew quite well—as well as if the words had been spoken—better than if they had been spoken, because the love-words that go unsaid are the most wonderful of all.

Another silence followed—there were so many that quiet, sunny afternoon—until they passed a clump of water forget-me-nots, and Mark gathered one, holding it against her sleeve.

"That's just the colour," he said; "you're like a forget-me-not in that dress, Susy. Won't you gather one for me?"

She paused a moment, looking at him with something of a child's candid question in her brown eyes, then gave him the flower, which really ought to be as much a part of an English Cupid's costume as the bow and arrows, for there is scarcely a rustic lover in England who does not owe it something.

Mark opened his pocket-book and placed the flower inside, doing the very thing that all lovers do, and which yet remains as new to everyone as it was to the lover-poet who first christened the forget-me-not.

"I shall keep that all my life," he said, very solemnly.

Then Susy grew afraid of the passion she had aroused, and began to talk quickly about nothing at all, as a woman does who wants to stave off the inevitable a little longer.

"If I could choose," she said, laughing rather nervously, "I know the sort of dress I should have. One of green silk with a gleamy shine on it. I'd love to go to London and get to be very clever, and make one like that for a real princess."

"You are a princess," said Mark, very low; but Susy pretended not to hear him.

Just then another couple came in sight, the clock struck four from the church tower above the trees. So they walked on silently together down the river bank with the vision splendid before their eyes, an invincible hopefulness and youth about them. It took them back to the little shop as if on wings, and Susy went into the kitchen with such a glow about her that Miss Dimsdale might have been very much stupider than she was, and yet have guessed the truth.

"H'm," she said, "so you've been running after young Branscombe again," and she looked over her spectacles to see if the bolt struck home.

"I've been for a walk with him, and shall again, if that's what you mean," replied Susy, with an angry sense that everything was being spoilt. "Why shouldn't I go out with him if I like?"

"Because," said Miss Dimsdale, harping on the old string, "he's only making game of you. He means nothing."

She knew all about the odd pride which lay deep

down in Susy's nature, difficult to reach but implacable when roused, and she was trying hard to rouse it against Mark, because she genuinely thought he was spoiling her niece's chance of a suitable marriage just for his own amusement.

"You don't want to be always thinking if a man means marriage or not, it's low," retorted Susy, hurt and resentful. "Low, that's what it is."

"It's a good deal lower not to think about it until too late," said Miss Dimsdale, seizing with unction the opening made for her. "I've no patience with the lasses now-a-days, just taking their pleasure without any thought of what folks 'll say about them. They'd more self-respect in my day."

"I don't think I'm wanting in that, aunt," said Susy, very erect.

"Well," said Miss Dimsdale, "you go trapezing about the country with a fellow that never lets the word marriage cross his lips: I don't know what you call that. And you may think I like scolding and bothering, but I can tell you I'd much rather have my tea in peace. Only I've brought you up, and been like a mother to you, though not one for liking children in a general way; and now you turn on me because I say a warning word. That's all you get in this world, I suppose, for doing a kindness; but I call it hard."

Susy's anger died quickly as usual, it was only her stubborn pride that ever lasted.

"There, aunt," she said, "I'm sorry I've vexed you, but do give up Jones, for I wouldn't have him if we were the last couple left on earth. Let me get you

some of that honey Mrs. Farrow put into my bag last night, and we'll forget there are such things as young men."

"If you would do that—" said Miss Dimsdale, helping herself to honey. "You mark my words, Susy, if a young fellow wants to marry a girl he'll make no bones about telling her so. I've lived a bit longer than you, and I know."

Susy reserved her opinion, but perhaps began to feel that her aunt did know; Miss Dimsdale was so sure and convincing. It certainly never occurred to either of them that a young man might pause because he felt himself unworthy, for they knew nothing of that tender reverence which makes the meanest lover great, by teaching him to worship.

Susy, in fact, privately determined to keep out of Mark's way; that odd, sleeping, seldom-stirred pride in her was beginning to awake at last.

When tea was over, she and her aunt sat in the little side window that fronted the high road, and watched the people go by to church and chapel. After the road was clear, and the sound of hymns began to hum faintly in the quiet air, a woman came out from a little house further down with a baby in her arms.

"That," said Miss Dimsdale, "is what comes of loving first, and thinking afterwards."

Susy looked out with scornful eyes that did not understand, feeling the healthy contempt which every young girl should feel for a woman who has understood too well.

CHAPTER III

THE exhilaration which had taken Mark on wings through Sunday night remained—a much more uncommon thing — to bear him along the road to Saltmarsh on Monday morning. As he went past the ripening fields, he had the most glorious feeling that all he did or could do was worth while—that it mattered to every bush and wayside flower whether he were happy or not—that creation was concerned in the matter.

A bird sang through the clear air a sort of gurgling song, and the sense of it seemed to be: "The world is made for you—you—you—you. The world is made for you—you—and she—she—she." Birds are not particular about grammar, and they cannot conveniently sing "her."

As he came nearer to the sea, the dykes grew wider and the trees more scarce, there was a cool, salt freshness in the breeze, and the low tower of Saltmarsh Church was visible through a haze of morning mist.

At last he could see George Hamilton's square house, and it looked as odd, standing alone there between the wide fens and the North Sea, as a top-hatted, frock-coated professional man in a harvest field. For the stone pillars, the flight of steps before

the front door, and the whole sedate respectability of the Georgian house might have been brought intact from a London square.

Every stranger who came to Saltmarsh inquired at once what the big red house was doing there. It seemed so incongruous in that dreary, wind-swept place. And the answer, of course, was always the same, discreet and yet illuminating. It had been built for George Hamilton's great-grandmother, who was the friend of a prince.

In front of the living-room window a stucco satyr grinned and piped among the sea-lavender and white spear grass—an outrage, somehow, on that little frugal village where men had to toil if they would eat. It was just as unlike to anything in those that dwelled around as the portrait of Mrs. Hamilton, the prince's friend, over the mantel-piece, or as George Hamilton himself.

Mrs. Hamilton's portrait still hung, all curls and smiles and exuberant charms, in a living-room which faced the satyr and the sea. But nobody knew whence she had come to that desolate spot, nor why a house had been built for her in such a difficult place for a royal friend to visit. Even her great-grandson—the son of a lonely recluse who had married his cook in his old age—knew no more of her than might be learned from that laughing, painted mouth and those wild, blue eyes.

Excepting one thing. And that one thing entirely altered George Hamilton's life.

For the pretty wildness in those eyes had saddened and deepened, perhaps with gazing at the wind-swept,

rain-swept satyr and the North Sea for so many long, still years, until finally it grew into madness. So the lady chattered her way into eternity with tales of routs and balls and parties at Ranelagh. But just at the end she made a feeble attempt to flutter her handkerchief, crying, quite loudly: "Fear God. Honour the King." Then she laughed, which is a queer thing for a woman, dying and alone, to do, and went to sleep for the last time.

Her grandson was a grown man at that period, in his third year at Oxford, and he stayed away after the funeral was over until he, too, began to grow old, and wanted to be quiet. Then he came back to Saltmarsh because that is a fine place to be quiet in; and married the country girl who cooked his gruel.

Now the boy born of that union had come back as well. Not that he had ever remained away as his father did, for he always superintended the farm himself, and managed to be on the spot at lambing season and harvest time: the blood of his mother bound him to the land, just as that of his father drove him away from it.

As he sat in the long, untidy room waiting for Branscombe, the brilliant morning clouded over, and the wind dropped until there was scarcely a breath of air, which seems strange always in a place where the wind blows on quite three hundred and fifty days in a year. The ragged creeper about the satyr hung like a garland—not like a streamer of defiance, as on stormy days—and the green-white grass stood straight and silent instead of rustling fiercely.

It was in such weather as this that Hamilton's

father had grown suddenly unmanageable, and his mother had had to get in a male attendant; he remembered just the dull feel of it, and was glad that his mother had gone to her grave with a north-easter shrieking and lifting her pall.

He rose to greet Mark with a fine courtliness of bearing which was absolutely unconscious, but which seemed to demand satin and ruffles rather than an old shooting-coat and easy slippers. Mark's rustic manner, with its veneer of university polish, appeared all the less imposing by contrast. Perhaps he realised this without knowing it, because his own greeting was more blunt than usual, and his north-country accent more pronounced. He looked, standing there by Hamilton, just what he was: a farmer who had learned too much Greek and Latin by a sort of accident.

"Well," said Hamilton, as they sat down, "you've come to talk business, so we may as well get that over at once. I suppose you have been definitely compelled to resign your post at the Market Yarborough Grammar School this term? Otherwise, if you could have kept on there another term or two, even at some sacrifice of personal pride—"

"But I can't," interrupted Mark. "They won't have me at any price. I can't feel myself aggrieved, of course; they were in the right from their point of view, and my only consolation is that the boy for once got the licking he deserved."

But for all that, the exhilaration was fast dying out of Mark's face and voice. He no longer went on wings.

"You have no hope of getting a new post in a school?" said Hamilton. "I ask you this because the offer I am going to make to you is not good enough to stand in the light of your permanent career."

"The agents decline to put me on their books," said Mark. "The newspaper publicity—you know the London half-pennies got hold of the case—has done for my chances as a schoolmaster."

"I wouldn't grieve over that too much," said Hamilton. "It was a career quite unsuited to you, Branscombe, because you're a born farmer. Now, will you come here and help me over the harvesting? My right-hand man, who sees to things in my long absences, is laid up with scarlet fever, and I want you to take his place, living, of course, with me. It'll be dull, but then there's no time to be dull during harvest. Would you care to take the job?"

"You're very good," said Mark; "I shall be only too glad."

"Then that's settled," said Hamilton. "You can let me know your terms when you find what there is to do. We shall not quarrel about them; and you'll save me no end of worry."

It is safe to say that Hamilton was indeed reaping some advantage from this arrangement, because only then, or on the impulse of some passing fancy, did a sort of lavish generosity show itself in him. But recipients of his bounty could not know this, and they constantly made the mistake of expecting it to continue when it was for their own benefit alone: he did all with such an easy air of not caring about cost.

"I wasn't cut out for a professional man," said Mark, staring at his boots; he was falling into the depths from the mountain of exhilaration, as he always did.

"No; you're a born farmer," said Hamilton again. "You were like a shepherd-dog tied up in a back-yard at the Grammar School. It's almost a pity you ever took a scholarship, Branscombe."

"Ay, it was," Mark answered; "and that just shows how differently things look afterwards. Why, my poor old father and mother sang, 'Lord, now lettest Thou thy servant depart in peace,' the Sunday night after I took my degree, with a feeling that they'd got everything life could give them. Ah, well, it's a blessing they did depart before I got the sack from the Grammar School."

He glanced out at the still grasses with a depression that corresponded in depth to the height of his past joyousness. His part in life suddenly seemed as futile as that of the tawdry satyr piping to the breathless day. Why was he making such ado about his future? What did anything *really* matter?

"What's the good of it all?" he blurted out.

It seemed as if Hamilton turned thoughts hardly formulated into words, with the strange power that an older mind sometimes has over a younger one. Mark felt ideas growing articulate within him which he never dreamed were there, and the sensation increased his admiration for the one who produced this effect—he was just at the beginning of being dominated.

"So *you've* got there, have you?" said Hamilton.

"Well, we most of us do, sooner or later, however full of the joy of living we may start out. I remember distinctly my first time. It was in Russia. Three of us were on a sleighing excursion, when I was taken ill with the unaccustomed cold and had to be left behind in a peasant's hut. As the night went on I grew so much worse that the peasant had to go for a doctor, and I was left alone. All around lay spread a waste of moonlit snow, and I crept to the door for company. I felt most horribly alone. And as I stood there I heard the sound of a wolf howling in the distance. I don't know why, but it seemed to me the embodiment of your question, 'What's the good?' I've never forgotten that moment."

"No," was all Mark said; but he felt himself surrounded by a sort of blaze of understanding. It seemed so wonderful that somebody had felt just the same as he did, because he was young and felt yet that all the emotions were specially created for him.

"After a while," Hamilton continued, "I came away from the cottage door, carelessly leaving it unfastened, and threw myself on the bed; but the exposure for those few moments to the cold air had brought on again such agonising pains that I could not have moved had my life depended on it. And the wolf-howl came closer, crying distinctly to my semi-delirious brain those words, 'What's the good of it all?' Then I heard another sound that was quite real and definite—an animal nosing at the door, a pair of red eyes set in a lean, hungry head pushed through—the wolf had actually come. But between pain and fear and delirium I was paralysed; I could

no more have moved in that moment than a dead man could. So I waited for a sickening, awful death. But the draught from the door caused the little red lamp beneath the eikon to flicker up, and the wolf was scared back for the moment—long enough for me to gather myself together and fling myself upon the door. The light beneath that picture of Christ saved me."

"But," said Mark, his voice rough and deep, "you hear the cry yet."

"Everybody does," said Hamilton. "The wolf is nosing just outside of everybody's life. The only thing is to keep him at bay. But can you?—Can you?" he added, under his breath.

The dull oppression of the day and the coming thunder worked on the two men or they would have kept their thoughts decently hidden as decent men do. But having once begun they were driven to go on.

"I think," said Branscombe slowly, "that love is the only way."

Hamilton felt the presence of those gay, painted eyes on the wall above his head, and laughed.

"Have a drink?" he said, pressing the bell.

CHAPTER IV

BRANSCOMBE went back after luncheon to fetch his belongings from Jim Pyne's, where he had always lodged at Suddaby. But on his way he was obliged to stop at an ironmonger's shop in Althorpe to see about a delayed turnip cutter for his new employer; unfortunately the ironmonger was at tea in his private residence, so Mark had to kick his heels up and down the narrow High Street, while the precious moments went by in which he intended to meet Susy on her road home from some distant farm.

His mind was so full of her that he stared into a draper's window until a young lady within called another to look at him; and they both pretended to rearrange some silks in the window in order to get a nearer view of this good-looking but curious young man. They giggled and let the packets fall, so that a stream of green silk shot across the dark woollens in front of the window like a glistening stream with the lights of a summer wood in it. Then Mark's blank eyes focussed, and he saw the pretty stuff. It was just what Susy had talked about—the green silk gown for his princess.

He walked a little further down the street and round a deserted corner, and there counted out his

money—he'd over five pounds—quite enough to pay Jim Pyne and buy this as well.

The young ladies were immensely interested when he came into the shop, very nervous but all aglow with the sweet pleasure of buying a bigger present than he could afford—everybody knows how nice that is.

He glanced nervously up and down the crowded shelves. Mark had never bought any article of dress before for a woman, and it made him feel as if Susy belonged to him already. He blushed and stammered so that the young ladies knew perfectly well what he was up to, and they had the warmest fellow-feeling when he asked how much silk a tall—tallish—that is a young—a lady of medium height would require? and then drew a long breath as if he had been running a race.

When the parcel was wrapped up, and Mark said he would take it with him, please, the young ladies almost clapped him on the back with a, "Go in and win!" they were so absolutely *in* it.

By this time the ironmonger had returned, exuding buttered toast at every pore, and the business was soon settled; but though Mark ran most of the way from Althorpe to Suddaby, he was too late to meet Susy at the cross roads as he had promised. So he set off again hoping to catch her up before she reached home, but the little brick shop stood sideways to a deserted street, and he held his parcel hugged in his arms with a most bitter, blank disappointment. He didn't want to send her it, he wanted so to see her face break into astonished

smiles when he opened the parcel—besides, it was a secret. Everything is a secret when you are frightfully in love and twenty-four.

He hung round the sweet-briar hedge, fancying how Susy would look in the green silk; not as a woman would see it, of course, with gores and frills and furbelows, but as a glorious whole. The very suggestion of her wearing it, a real princess, dowered with all the weakness and strength that one of nature's royal maids should have, made his pulses tingle. Her wonderful vitality, and her love of beautiful clothes; her boundless good-nature, and that undisciplined pride which woke seldom, but always unexpectedly; her sweetness, and her foolish wish to make things go smoothly for the time, without looking ahead—all this intoxicated Mark.

At last he could bear it no longer, and boldly marched up the two steps into the little shop, determined to ask if Susy were at home. But at the first sight of Miss Dimsdale his boldness started to evaporate; her aspect bristled so with unspoken disapproval that he said—

"Good-evening," and no more.

"What may I get for you?" she said, leaning over the counter and tapping it with a pencil, evidently determined to keep the interview strictly upon business lines.

Mark gazed from peppermints to candles and back again to a tin of ginger biscuits.

"I—I'll take a pound of those, please," he said. "And how's Miss Susy?"

"Quite well, thank you," replied Miss Dimsdale,

weighing and parcelling much more quickly than usual. "And what else?" as he still hesitated by the counter.

Mark's eye roved around; he grew flustered, and could think of nothing but the mustard advertisement immediately before him.

"A tin of mustard—a—large tin," he gasped. "Did you say Miss Susy was at home?"

But Miss Dimsdale clanged tins on a shelf and feigned not to hear, and wrapped up the tin in the back part of the shop.

"Good-evening," she said, handing it to him with a grim smile on her face.

He glanced in desperation at the little window, where bottles of sweets were displayed to tempt the children, and a splendid inspiration came to him. Bulls'-eyes, he remembered from his childish days, were sold by count—that would take time.

"I'll take three shillings worth," he gasped.

"That'll be a whole bottle, then," said Miss Dimsdale; "we sell that quantity by the bottle, and I've a full one here. *Good*-evening."

A few minutes later Jim Pyne came in.

"Young Branscombe's got a job with Mr. Hamilton—leaving to-morrow morning first thing," he said.

"Oh, then, that's it," remarked Miss Dimsdale.

"What's what?" asked Jim.

"Nothing," said the lady, going into the room at the back.

"There's times," muttered Jim, following her, "when I should nearly call you aggravating."

But she only got out the cake and ginger wine with the sort of youthfulness that marked her movements always; she was so much younger at fifty-eight than most people ever are, that she must have received more than her share of the spirit of life.

"Susy," she called then, "come down and have a bit of cake."

Susy came down the stairs at once, humming with an overdone gaiety and an air of having all she wanted: she was not going to let sharp Aunt Dimsdale guess that she had waited half an hour that evening for a young man who did not arrive.

"Here's your very good health, and plenty of trade," said Jim Pyne politely.

"If I only got a few more customers like I had to-night," said Anne Dimsdale, leaning back in her chair with a chuckle.

"Who was it?" asked Jim curiously.

"Oh, nobody belonging to Suddaby," answered Miss Dimsdale.

"What did he buy?" asked Susy, with very perfunctory interest.

"Mustard, gingerbreads, bulls'-eyes," answered Miss Dimsdale, laughing until the tears came.

"Had a hot taste, seemingly," said Jim, striving to grasp the joke. "He—he!" Then he saw it really was *not* funny, and revolted. "Don't see any such fine joke about that, all the same," he concluded.

"You would if you'd been in my shoes," said Miss Dimsdale, nodding her head. Then she began to talk about some new people who had come to a farm near, and wondered if they were church or chapel.

"As strong Primitives as I am," said Jim Pyne, "the Lord be praised!"

"Church is just as good," snapped Miss Dimsdale.

"Aught's good," said Jim Pyne, with a look on his face very pleasant to see, "that makes you feel the goodness of God."

"There's not near so much religion about, though, as there used to be," said Miss Dimsdale. "There's more fuss about it, but not so much *of* it."

"May be not," said Pyne. "I remember when the old parson in our village never went out of a house but he dropped on his knees to say a prayer first. He was very great on two or three being gathered together—not that I ain't the same—I sort of feel as if He was closer when we talked about Him— You don't know—mebbe He's here this minute"; and he glanced solemnly round the little room.

"You don't know nothing," said Miss Dimsdale, with great seriousness, "but that He's minding you now, and waiting for you hereafter. The greatest of us can't know no more than that."

"Looks like more rain," said Jim, opening the door, without the slightest change of tone, for the goodness of God was no further from him than the nearest things of every day.

The shop door was closed after him, and Miss Dimsdale put the wooden bar across it and went to bed. Mark could see the lights travelling from the lower to the upper windows as he watched from his lodgings, where he sat in the dark with the green silk gown and the mustard, gingerbreads and bulls'-eyes, thinking what a fool he had been. All the off-hand

ways in which he could have demanded to see Susy ran through his mind, and he was in a fever of empty humiliation, wondering why his assurance suddenly failed him when he wanted it most, not knowing, of course, that when real love comes to a young man glib assurance goes. He had felt in his strength that there was nothing greater than himself, and he faltered beneath the shock and glory of the new revelation; the right sort of young man always does kneel, even though the image behind the glory be only made of plaster of Paris and the commonest kind of gilding.

He sat there until the few roysterers from the "Dog and Duck" had stumbled home to their scattered cottages; the moon sailed quiet and wonderful above a sleeping village, and Miss Dimsdale's little shop showed clear as day—only transfigured like a house in a fairy tale—with all the ugly realities left out.

It was not a night to go to bed and sleep—it was a night to stand in meadows watching the fairies dance green rings against the morning—to listen to water under deep trees telling the secrets of the wood—to catch the shy beasts and birds and insects setting forth upon their mysterious errands. Oh, not a night to sleep in, but to be more awake than ever in life before.

Mark let himself out quietly; the Pynes were used to his moving about after they had gone to bed, and did not heed, and beyond the garden every footstep seemed to make a report on the hard road. Instinctively he stepped aside upon the grassy edge—it was

a night for silence—and walked on to the little fairy house sleeping in the moonlight.

The west wind which had tossed the ivy round the windows all day died down at sunset, every leaf hung quiet. He looked up at the blank panes behind which Miss Dimsdale reposed, and he wondered that such an ordinary little woman should be able to govern Susy. And away to the right, under Susy's window, was a sweet-briar bush; the aching fragrance of it—

Susy—Susy!

He crept through the garden gate, and along the edge of the path to the little plot of grass by the house-side, from which a pear-tree rose like a fairy ladder of silver and ebony towards her window. He held the green silk closer to him, and stood hesitating —dare he climb up there and lay his gift upon her window-sill, so that she would find it when she looked out next morning?

A cloud sailed across the moon, and in the dusk he began to climb from one stout pear branch to another, until, just as he reached her window, the light shone clear, and the tree was a magic ladder once again. He could see now that the casement was open, and the blind drawn up—if he were to look in perhaps he should see her sleeping.

But he must not look.

Still—if he did—

The thought made him tremble so that he slipped on the pear branches, and caught at the sill in a way that made the casement crash and rattle. The paper tore on a twig, and the green silk spread like a

cascade in the moonlight, which lighted all the room excepting that dark corner where Susy lay. Mark could only hear her quick-breathed:

"What is it?"

His foothold on the tree was so difficult that he put his knee upon the narrow sill.

"Hush, Susy," he whispered; "don't be frightened. It's only me—Mark Branscombe. I'd bought a little fairing for you from Althorpe, and I couldn't see you, though I waited for hours up and down the lane. So I was going just to lay it on your window-sill where you could find it in the morning. That's all."

There was a silence. Mark could hear nothing but the heavy "thud, thud" of his own heart.

"Go, then, and leave it there," came a whisper from the dark. "Oh, do go, Mark."

He still knelt on the sill, half in, half out; her white dimity curtains touched his cheek. The moonlight fell full on a gown thrown over a chair and her little worn shoes.

"Won't you say good-night?" he asked breathlessly. "I'll go, sweetheart, if you'll just say good-night."

He pushed the shining, gleaming mass of silk through the window; it went whispering in like a message, but there was no reply.

"Say good-night," he pleaded again.

"Good-night," came very soft and low from the dark corner; then Mark climbed down the fairy ladder to common earth again.

Susy crouched down in bed, waiting, and when the garden gate told her that he had gone away,

she crept out of bed and touched the beautiful shimmering silk that flowed over the shabby carpet in the patch of moonlight near the window. Her brown hair was tumbled, her brown eyes shone, her cheeks were flushed with sleep, as she drew the silken folds round her over her nightdress. She did look a princess rising out of all that tender moonlit green.

But there is not much satisfaction in looking sweet for the moonlight to see, and so Susy drew down the blind and lit two candles before the mottled, long-shaped glass that stood on the drawers top. It only reflected her face, however, and a bit of shoulder, until she held the green folds up under her chin.

"A—ah!" A long-drawn sigh of ecstasy. How it *did* suit her. Dear, dear Mark. It was the loveliest present she had ever had in all her life. She ached to begin at once to cut and stitch it into an incomparable whole, for she was an artist who had never before known the joy of a chance to do her best. The farmers' wives and daughters round only entrusted her with homely wool and cotton, mostly in colours and patterns that offended her natural fine taste.

Oh—the thought took away her breath—if she could only always be dressed in beautiful things like this!

But the candle-wicks danced oddly. What was it? She looked sharply round and saw Miss Dimsdale standing in the door.

There was a moment's pause while Susy and her

aunt stared at each other in the odd shadows made by the flickering candles, and the silk fled whispering to the floor.

"So this," said Miss Dimsdale, "is what comes of taking up with men that don't mean to marry you. I heard the gate click—I watched Branscombe go up the road. But I never thought he'd been doing more than hang about under your window, like young fools do before they get shut of their milk teeth."

Susy looked defiantly back at the older woman, but in her heart she was afraid—not of Miss Dimsdale herself, but of that power she possessed of bending outside circumstances to her will. All sorts of outside and unexpected things always seemed to help that little woman, and so showed the genius of the born despot.

"Susy," she continued, "do my eyes deceive me, or is that silk?" She picked it up gingerly between finger and thumb as if it were a contamination. "Did Branscombe bring you this?"

"He put it on my window-sill, why shouldn't he?" said Susy.

"Why shouldn't he?" echoed Miss Dimsdale. "Then you've come down to that—to letting him give you clothes like any slut out of the village that hasn't nothing to lose. You—that I've brought up like my own, and taught to fear God, and make pastry same as I do—I can't believe it. But he'll have to marry you now or reckon with me. Oh, Susy, how could you throw yourself away like that—how could you?"

As she spoke her meaning slowly came home to

the girl. Then her aunt believed—that. A very fury of youth's intolerant anger seized her. Her aunt believed *that*. Her aunt, who had lived with her and had known her all these years, and watched her day in and day out, chose to believe such evil of her without hearing a word in explanation! Very well then—there was an end of it. She *could* believe. The queer pride that underlay Susy's good-humour was aroused, and it had a strength which she herself knew nothing about; a power to drive her into almost any act of inconsiderate folly and keep her chained to the after consequences.

"Haven't you a word to say?" asked Miss Dimsdale at last. "I expected you would flare up and call me everything. I never thought you would take it quiet like this. I hoped—"

She stopped short, and two tears ran down her cheeks.

"Oh, my lass," she sobbed, "I prayed as I come up them stairs that you would call me a liar."

Then Susy's good-humour flowed back in a tide of warm kindness, but her roused pride stood up still like a rock in the midst of it.

"Hush, aunt," she said, putting her arms round those lean, heaving shoulders, "don't take it to heart like that. Of course it looked bad, and nearly anybody would have thought as you did. Only you may take my word that Mark never came over the window-sill.

Miss Dimsdale sat up and dried her eyes.

"Why on earth couldn't you tell me that at first?" she said sharply.

"I — I don't know," hesitated Susy. "It was stupid of me, I suppose, but I think I wanted you to —to not *want* telling."

"Well, I believe you," said Miss Dimsdale, moving towards the door. "So we'll let all be as it was before."

Susy followed her, and stood in a white nightdress, towering over the little indomitable figure.

"No," she said, "we can't. I should never know when you were not going to trust me again. I shall go to Cousin Ada in London. There's a day trip this week. I'll go up and see what she says."

Miss Dimsdale came back into the room.

"Have I done any less for you, Susy, than your own mother would have done? Have I been worse to you than I should have been to a girl of my own if I had had one?" she said solemnly.

"No," answered Susy, "you haven't. And my own mother, if she'd lived, and seen what you've seen, might have thought what you've thought—but I shall have to go all the same."

"And this," said Miss Dimsdale, "is how you get paid back for taking in a fatherless and motherless bairn."

Her heavy steps sounded on the stairs—you could somehow tell by them that age was coming at last—and Susy waited until they began to cross the landing. Then she had to follow them.

"Stop!" she cried, "I can't pay you back like that —I'll do anything you want. But I'm like somebody choked here, not knowing what way to turn."

Miss Dimsdale stood still with her candle guttering in the draught.

"If you feel like that, it makes a difference," she said. "Maybe you'd be best away for a time. I don't want to be hard on you." She suddenly remembered that Jones the auctioneer often went up to London on business, and stayed at the same boarding-house as Miss Ada Drewery. "I'll go up with you for the day and see what we can arrange," she concluded, almost cheerfully. "But I expect you'll get a good husband soon, and that'll put a stop to all this nonsense."

Then, with her hand on her door knob, she paused again.

"Susy!" she cried across the landing, "you're not going to make up that green silk, are you? It's an insult for a man to buy a girl clothes—if he wants to do that he ought to marry her. He'd never have done that if you'd been settled in a good farm with your own father and mother. He wouldn't have dared. It's because he thinks you beneath him."

"You can have it for patchwork, aunt, if you like," said poor Susy, holding her head very high. "I'm sure I don't want it."

Then she shut her door, and was a long, long time before she went to sleep, so that high day shone on the green silk when she awoke, showing it to be all soiled and stained by the pear branches and Mark's rough handling of it, just as her thoughts of Mark were by Miss Dimsdale's words.

He looked down on her, she saw that now.

And all the time poor Mark was kneeling to her, only he hadn't learned that a woman must be *told*.

CHAPTER V

BUT that incapacity to know what other people are thinking of us works both ways, and is, on the whole, a tremendous blessing: it just enables poor, sensitive humanity to keep plodding on with a brave heart.

So Mark went back to Saltmarsh next day, hoping that Susy thought of him as he wished her to think, and he still thrilled so with the recollection of her "Good-night" that the whole world seemed to be bidding him "Good-morning."

But Susy herself came down to breakfast with an armful of green silk patches which she threw upon the table.

"There, aunt," she said, her voice hard and high, her head defiant, "now you'll have a fine quilt—fit for a palace."

"Susy!" cried Miss Dimsdale, almost scared, as great generals sometimes are by too much success. But she was consoled for the waste of good material by the thought that Mark was evidently done with, and Jones loomed pleasantly in his thick gold chain on the new horizon. "Well, put it in the bit bag," she said equably, "I'll maybe find time to patch a new quilt this winter, though I'm no great patcher. It'll do for you some day."

"Never!" cried Susy; "not if I was perishing with cold at the North Pole."

Then she stuffed the pieces into the bag and pretended to eat her breakfast; and that was the end of the green gown.

"Where are you going?" said Miss Dimsdale, as Susy went through the kitchen carrying a parcel. "I didn't know you were working to-day."

"I'm not," said Susy. "It's only Mrs. Green's bodice I want to fit on, I'm afraid I've got the sleeves too small."

"Why, that's four miles off, eight miles there and back—I should have thought you would wait until she came over here on Saturday."

"No, I'll go. Then I can get it out of the way," responded Susy.

"You'll be dog-tired," said her aunt.

Susy made no reply. That was what she wanted—she wanted to be dog-tired.

"You'll be up to nothing for the trip to London if you get tired out," continued Miss Dimsdale.

London! She'd actually forgotten that she was to pay her first visit to London the next day—the pleasure that had shone before her all her life—and she had forgotten it.

But it is wonderful what eight miles of quiet road with the familiar rest of green on either side will do for anybody—even a girl in love. The hurt remained, of course, the certainty that her lover treated her less highly than he would if she were in a different position, but the first bitter sting subsided. She began to blame circumstances rather than him.

And when she and Miss Dimsdale got up in the blue hush of a perfect August dawning it was simply impossible not to feel elated. Nobody who has not waited until they were grown up can know how it feels to be going to London for the first time, really. There's a mixture of mature powers of enjoyment, with a long vista of childish thoughts about London town, that makes it just marvellous. Even the fact that Jones was going up on business in the same carriage did not make much difference, and he kept Aunt Dimsdale and the rest of the party in a constant state of merriment, doing the town gentleman to any extent with his top-hat on the rack, and a travelling-cap on his head. The climax of daring, devil-may-care-ness was reached when he ordered in refreshment baskets containing claret. They privately thought it like very inferior sloe-wine gone sour, but held it up to the light in the little thick tumblers with the air of connoisseurs, and wished the folks left at home could just see them.

Then the pill advertisements began to mark off the miles—London 59—London 40—London 25—the golden city was almost in sight!

"Is *this* London?" said Susy, dismayed when they stopped finally at King's Cross.

Jones roared. There seemed something so exquisitely funny in anybody not knowing that, and his sense of humour had been heightened by certain whiskies on the way. But he was very good in seeing them into the right omnibus, and remarked with the manner of a man of the world that he knew London like the palm of his own hand. They were

to go to Scotland Yard and wait for him if they got lost.

With this final pleasantry he departed, and Miss Dimsdale said what good company he was; nobody could ever be dull with him. She herself preferred a man who'd cut all his milk teeth.

"Well, Jones has done *that*," said Susy. Then she devoted herself to watching the little mean streets round King's Cross, which were so very different from all she had expected—quite as different as a child's golden dream must be from the city of reality.

But by the time they alighted at Oxford Circus, and she had noted through the 'bus window names of shops only previously seen on bottles and boxes and in advertisements, she began to taste the solid pleasures which remain in reality after all—different, but still most satisfying. She and Miss Dimsdale stood in front of one huge draper's store positively gasping; and when they saw that the units which went to make such a riot of shine and colour only cost one and elevenpence halfpenny each, that seemed, somehow, to bring the splendour of London within reach of them.

"Come in," said Miss Dimsdale, with a splendid sense of "going it"; "we'll have one each."

But the plate-glass door, with the porter in blue and gold, was rather upsetting, and they stood bewildered by the heat and noise and colour inside until a wilted shop-walker, pale with August heat, came up to them, with a

"What's your pleasure, madam?"

"Ties," said Miss Dimsdale shortly; she was not going to let him see she was abashed.

"Ties," he repeated to another assistant, and they were handed through so many rooms, and down so many passages, that they began to have the swimming, breathless sensation of persons in a maze.

"Ties," said a last melancholy voice, and they sank down by the counter.

"Pale blue, one and elevenpence halfpenny," said Miss Dimsdale, shutting her lips tightly over the words, and speaking in a mincing tone. She wasn't going to let out that she came from the country to that supercilious young woman in black silk.

"Oh, you've come to the wrong counter. We only keep the better qualities here," said the young lady; then, with ineffable hauteur, "Cheap lines, three shops further to the left," and she withdrew herself into a green cardboard box.

The printing on the top of that box caught Susy's eye—Parkinson & Diver.

"Is this Parkinson & Diver's?" she exclaimed.

The young lady emerged and stared at them as one might upon a storm-cast jellyfish who spoke, with the same sort of cold surprise.

"Yes," she let fall, fixing her light blue eyes on this curious specimen.

"Well, then," said Miss Dimsdale, with a heightening colour, "I shall be obliged if you will tell Miss Ada Drewery I wish to speak to her at once. She is my niece."

"Miss Drewery, the head fitter," gasped the cold

young lady, in the tone once used to speak of potentates—before we were all equal.

"Yes, she's my niece," repeated Miss Dimsdale, drawing herself up. "My own sister's child. Two brothers married two sisters."

"If you'll wait a moment," said the young lady, with great respect, "I'll see if I can take your message."

There was quite a stir in the department when Miss Drewery herself, clad in stiff black satin that seemed fitted to no mortal mould, swished down between the counters. She was genuinely delighted to see her relatives, but her position in the business demanded a code of conduct almost superhuman in its correctness—like the black satin bodice. So she greeted them in a way that added the last touch to their bewildered sense of being in a maze, and made them feel they must now have got to the core of it. This was never, Miss Dimsdale felt, "our Ada," and she scarcely comprehended her niece's appointment to meet them.

"Meet you at a lion's in Piccadilly?" she said, grasping her head, and seeing everything go round her.

"Lyons' restaurant," explained Miss Drewery hastily. "Any policeman will tell you. Three o'clock. I will manage to get off by then."

Then she swished away again, and her two relatives made for the first exit they could find; they wanted no more ties.

"Well," said Miss Dimsdale, putting her bonnet straight, and pulling her tight veil over her nose,

"that's a queer thing: us just chancing on Ada's shop. Let's walk down the street a bit and settle ourselves."

So they wandered slowly from one shop to another, admiring heartily without a trace of envy towards those who could go in and buy, with none of the mean spirit which begins to want as soon as it sees, but just that warm and pleasant joy in looking at pretty things, which country folk know when they come up to town.

They were standing before a fine flower shop, not at its best in this off-season, and going into the doorway to get a nearer view of a gilt basket filled with roses, they rather blocked up the entrance.

"Please allow me—" began a gentleman who wanted to pass. Then they looked up, and he looked down, and it was Mr. Hamilton. "Why," he said, holding out his hand, "it's never Miss Dimsdale?"

He was not in London clothes as it was August, but in his morning suit, with a flower in his buttonhole, he represented to Miss Dimsdale all the pomps and vanities of this wicked world. It seemed quite right and expected to meet him in London. If she had met the devil there, or the political leader with whom she did not agree, she would have felt the same.

"We're on a trip, and haven't much time," she said. "Good-morning!"

But he was being good to Mark, and Susy couldn't have him dismissed like that.

"I thought you were busy with the harvest," she said, flushing with nervousness and the thought of Mark.

"Oh, I've left Branscombe in charge," he said. "I had to come up on business." Then he glanced at the window. "Won't you let me give you a bunch of flowers? They look so cool this hot morning." And without waiting for a reply he went back into the shop.

"Let's give him the slip," urged Miss Dimsdale.

But Susy waited, neither for the flowers, nor for Hamilton himself, but for the man who had befriended her lover.

He came back soon with a careless posy of white roses in his hand, and Miss Dimsdale thought if he had been going to do it at all, he might have done it better than that—you could get white roses at home—and there was not even a bit of ribbon round them.

"A white rose with the dew still on it—that seemed all right," was what he said to Susy.

But, somehow, his way of saying it, and his way of giving the flowers, seemed to leave her honoured and him gracious; though nothing could be more simple than his manner. At that moment a friend came up to him with the sort of surprised greeting that people give each other who meet in Oxford Street in August, but he waited to take farewell of Miss Dimsdale and Susy with the same courtesy that he would have shown to a duchess and her daughter. They unconsciously walked the pavements with a little more assurance when they left him.

After that, the time seemed to go on wings until it was half-past two and they had to meet Miss Ada Drewery; so, after asking about a score of those wonderful policemen, who absorb all the courtesy

and good-nature which this hurried generation has no use for, they arrived outside the restaurant ten minutes too soon. As they waited about up and down the pavement, they began to feel as if the eye of Piccadilly were suspiciously upon them, wondering what they were doing, and taking them for pick-pockets, or something equally reprehensible. It never occurred to them, of course, that Piccadilly did not care two screws about them, they were so used to a warm and genial little world where everybody cared one way or another.

At last Miss Drewery appeared, quiet, but, as she herself felt, stylish and ladylike enough to carry off even Aunt Dimsdale's bonnet and Susy's skirt.

"Not," as she kindly remarked, "that you've got bad taste, Susy. The *idea's* all right, a simple cotton gown and shady hat, but the cut's all wrong. Now I've just come back from my holiday at Dieppe, and I must own those Frenchwomen—but there—you didn't come here to talk about dressmaking."

"That's just what I did come for," said Susy.

She had been rather silent, letting Ada Drewery's talk wash over her, as it were, but now the odd pride which lay underneath all her excitement at this first sight of London began to stir again. It was, once roused, as steady and curiously persistent in its return as any other deep-seated pain, and it influenced her conduct as people are influenced by some secret malady; her actions were as little traceable to it, by the outside world, as are the sad bitterness or unreasoning dislike of a man who seems well, to his hidden infirmity—until too late.

"You came here to talk about dressmaking," laughed Miss Drewery; her laugh was for the people at the next table, on a very high note, intensely refined. "Why, I should have thought you'd get plenty of that subject at home."

"I want to get in at Parkinson & Diver's," said Susy, first red, and then very pale in her earnestness. "Oh, Cousin Ada, you always told me you could find me a place there—can't you do it?"

Cousin Ada drew herself up.

"If I advised Mr. Diver—Mr. Parkinson's out of it, you know, gone," she lowered her voice, "elsewhere. But if I asked Mr. Diver to take a South Sea Islander, he'd just remark, 'It seems strange to *me*, Miss Drewery, but I can trust your judgment.'"

"Well, then!" exclaimed Susy, clasping her hands.

"But your aunt's always been against your coming," said Miss Drewery, glancing at Miss Dimsdale, who sat very erect, drinking her tea with her teaspoon. "What does your aunt think? After what she's done for you in the past, you can't go against her. Much as I wanted to have you here, I've always felt that."

Miss Dimsdale choked, because she felt that two grand ladies in feather boas at the next table must be noticing the crushed rose on the left side of her bonnet; the thought just occurred to her when she saw them glancing in her direction. And Susy waited in an agony of impatience. She wanted dreadfully to come away from Suddaby — to be beyond the reach of Mark, so that he could not

offer her those attentions which meant he looked down upon her. She firmly believed now that he would never have dared to climb up to the window-sill of a good girl whom he regarded as his social equal. Her aunt had been completely successful there.

"You and Susy," Miss Dimsdale said, when she recovered from her fit of choking, "must do as you think best. I'm getting old and silly, no doubt; there's not any need to consider me."

"I should like to hear anybody else call you silly; you'd soon show them," ejaculated Miss Drewery. "But if you really mean her to come, I must own I think you're doing right. She's a real talent for dressmaking—I've seen that for years—and it's a shame that such talent should be buried in Suddaby. Besides, you've old age to think about—she'd not make enough in a thousand years at Suddaby to provide against the future."

"There's no need to bother about Susy's future," replied Miss Dimsdale. "She's only to lift up her little finger to get a husband."

Miss Drewery bridled, and settled her fringe.

"You might have said the same about me, I'm sure," she replied, rather shortly. "But I'm Ada Drewery still, for all that."

There was a pause in which Miss Dimsdale, with a great effort, and a recollection that Ada Drewery paid for the tea, suppressed any spoken comparison between the looks of her two nieces: not that she liked one more than the other, but she did like making sharp remarks.

"It's a pity Susy didn't bring her box with her," she said. "That would have saved no end. Now she's got to go back again, and then pay ordinary fare; it'll be nearly a pound with cabs and one thing or another—it seems clear waste."

"Why," said Miss Drewery, "I know the very thing. Mrs. Farrow's sister at Market Yarborough is coming up on Saturday to stay with a brother-in-law—I heard from her only yesterday—and she'd bring the box with her, of course. Only too pleased. She and I often go to a theatre together when she's staying at Blackheath."

"But I've nothing but what I stand up in," gasped Susy. "I must go back."

"Oh, yes," began Miss Dimsdale. Then a thought flashed into her mind. If Susy stayed now, there would be no danger of a farewell interview with Mark, which could lead to nothing but unhappiness. "Well, when I think about it," she continued, "I see it's not a bad plan. You could lend her a few things, Ada, until her box comes; and folks like us don't pick up sovereigns in the road."

"Aunt Dimsdale, Ada—oh, I must go back!" cried Susy. "I must pack my things and stow the rest away. Nobody can do it for me. And there's Mrs. Parker's bodice to finish."

"Miss Brown at Long Marston can do that," said Cousin Ada, with business-like decision. Then in an aside to Susy: "You strike while the iron's hot."

"I must go back," said Susy doggedly.

Then Miss Dimsdale felt sure that Susy wanted to see Mark again, and shot her bolt.

"If you're hankering after a last word with that good-for-nothing Branscombe—" she began.

"Stop!" interrupted Susy, her brown eyes shining, her cheeks all aflame. "You know it isn't that, aunt."

But deep down in her heart she feared it was, and pride forced out her next words.

"If that's what you think, I'll stay. Only remember to send all my white petticoats and any stockings worth darning. I don't see how you'll know what I want, that's all I'm bothering about. I wish there wasn't such a thing as a man in the world."

"Oh, you'll get over that," said Miss Dimsdale dryly; but at that moment she again saw the ladies in feather boas looking her way, and her composure vanished.

She drew down her tight veil with an embarrassed cough, and wished she had bought a fresh rose somewhere that morning. She'd have been all right then.

Nothing would have made her believe that those ladies never even noticed her, much less her bonnet, much less still the rose in her bonnet.

CHAPTER VI

It was very late indeed when Miss Dimsdale got back to the little shop that night. She took the key from its accustomed place, then stood a moment breathing in the sweet, quiet air without any conscious knowledge of the sweetness or quietness, but just a very pleasant sense of being at home. The day in London was as much to her—as splendid a subject for conversation and retrospect—as a trip round the world to those in the midst of things. It would last until the end of her life, with each detail clear and vivid. The joy of it was only just beginning when she stood there on the doorstep in the dawn, and wondered who would come into the shop next day, and imagined what she should say to them.

She would miss Susy greatly, of course, but the constant little comings and goings in the shop would not let her be dull, for she was, with the most distinct appearance of not being, a great lover of company. She loved to feel her mind and will playing over minds and wills less alert and ready than her own.

By the time Sunday came round it seemed the natural thing for her to be alone in the house, with the thought of Susy in London; life settles down so naturally and quickly for women like her, unless they

chance to have a worshipping husband and lose him; then, sometimes, they break up, but nothing else breaks them.

Miss Dimsdale was taking her nap after her Sunday's dinner when she was disturbed by a knock at the door.

"Oh, how do you do, Miss Dimsdale?" said Mark, nervously and effusively. "I heard from Mr. Hamilton that you and Miss Susy were in London, so I thought I'd just come to see—if—if—you had got home."

His words tailed off into an embarrassed pause, and his fair skin turned crimson under Miss Dimsdale's cold, astonished eye.

"You're very good," she said. "I got home all right, thank you; I mostly do when I go out. But my niece stopped in London. She isn't coming back."

"Not—not coming back!" stammered poor Mark.

"No, she's got a situation at a place of business there," said Miss Dimsdale, with true enjoyment—this, after all, was what she had parted with Susy for.

"At Parkinson & Diver's, where Miss Drewery is?" said Mark.

"Yes," said Miss Dimsdale shortly. She had not wished him to know that, but he would hear from someone else if he wanted to do so sufficiently.

She said no more, and he said no more, and a thrush piped very loudly in the garden.

"I suppose," said Mark at last, in desperation, "that a letter addressed care of Parkinson & Diver would find her?"

"I really can't say," replied Miss Dimsdale, closing the door.

Mark hammered on it, very white now and determined.

"Miss Dimsdale!" he shouted, "you must hear me. If you don't all the village shall, for I must have my say."

"Go away, I've nothing to tell you," replied Miss Dimsdale through the door, turning the key in the lock as she spoke.

She was only just in time, for Mark took hold of the handle and shook and rattled, but without success. The old door was too well made to give.

"I will have the right address," he shouted. "Tell me the right way to be sure of finding her. I will have it."

Miss Dimsdale caught sight, through the side window, of a neighbour approaching, so she felt obliged to let this headstrong young man in. He seemed ready for anything—and on a Sunday afternoon — she was glad indeed that she had never favoured him.

"Now, Miss Dimsdale," he said, when he was once inside, "I want to know where your niece, Susan, is, because I mean to go and ask her to marry me, as I should have done this afternoon if I could have seen her."

Miss Dimsdale held her breath as if she hung over a precipice. Only four days before, had Susy gone to London. The Lord be praised for this and all His mercies! Four days later and the auctioneer might have taken his fine house and imposing watch-

chain elsewhere, he would never have had a chance to be her nephew-in-law.

"When I tell you," she said at last, "that she cut up your fine green silk for patches, and stuffed them into my old bit bag, perhaps you'll believe that she doesn't want to have nothing to do with you."

Mark went rather white, then very red.

"Show me the pieces. I'll believe it then, but not before," he said.

"Very well," answered Miss Dimsdale, and without another word she led him through the brick passage to a cupboard under the stairs, where she opened the mouth of the dingy calico bag and showed him his dishonoured gift.

"Now, perhaps, you'll believe me," she said, but she had the mercy not to look in his face when she let him out at the back door, because she was too strong to care for hurting just for hurting's sake; she only hit with a purpose.

Mark fetched his cob from the "Dog and Duck," and went back again, feeling that everything was over. There was no reflection from the West behind the red house at Saltmarsh to-night when he came in sight of it; it stood square and sombre against the sky, with the sunset wind blowing cold across the white grasses and sea-lavender.

Hamilton stood at the window after his restless habit as Mark entered, but, not being a woman, he forbore to remark upon Mark's white face or his return so much earlier than was expected.

"Blowing up for rain," was all he said. "We shall not be able to start reaping to-morrow."

Mark sat down heavily by the table. Hamilton's very lack of curiosity made him want to say something.

"Susy's gone to London for good," he began. "That's why I'm back so soon."

He was staring at the table-cloth, and did not see Hamilton's expression, but it was, just then, very like that of the painted face above the mantel-piece.

"She'll be all the more glad to see you after a parting," he suggested. "They always are."

"Not," said Mark, standing very solemn against the light, and biting his lip to prevent it trembling, "not when they've given your only present to their aunt."

Hamilton's eyes were rather sad though he was smiling. How splendid to be so young, so really full of hope, in spite of a passing shadow.

"Even that," he returned, "may, under some circumstances —"

"Never!" interrupted Mark, "never. She cut it into small pieces beforehand."

"On the contrary, that is a most hopeful sign," said Hamilton. "It shows feeling; and so far as a woman's concerned, where there is feeling, there is always hope. I daresay the old aunt had been bullying her about your attentions in some way, and so she took fire and revenged herself on your gift."

"It was green silk," said Mark. "The most beautiful colour. She would have looked like a princess in it."

Hamilton crossed the room with that peculiar

fineness of deportment which never failed to impress the young man whose country training had only been glossed over by three years at college.

"Buck up," he said. "Just wait until harvest's over, and we'll go like two gallant knights in search of the lost Princess. I shall be in town then, on my way abroad, and I invite you to stay with me at my hotel, then you can see for yourself what she meant by it. We'll have a grand time."

That was where Hamilton's power came in—he not only *was* generous where his own interests did not conflict, but he really *liked* to be generous; Mark went into supper with him, glowing with gratitude and admiration.

"Let's have a bottle of champagne," said Hamilton, as they were sitting down. The tall glasses which soon foamed beside them were dull and badly polished, but engraved with a royal crown; perhaps Hamilton noticed this afresh as he held up the wine before the lamplight — anyway, the mixture of gaiety and sadness in his face became more apparent.

"A health to the princess," he said, "and may she never lose her fairy kingdom!"

The champagne which Mark had only drunk at weddings and such high festivals mounted to his head.

"It's real," he cried, "I love her!"

Hamilton laughed, Mark's excitement amused him.

"What's love?" he said. "An appetite like that for food and drink—nothing more."

"Ah—you don't know," stammered Mark eagerly. "When you once know—"

"If I don't know—well—I must be a fool indeed," said Hamilton.

"But were you ever engaged?" asked Mark, hitting the bull's eye at random in his excitement. "Because that's different, isn't it—asking a woman to be your wife?"

Hamilton's face clouded, and he frowned at the head of his dingy table like an offended potentate—had Mark *dared?*

Then he met the young man's astonished open look, and saw that no double meaning was intended.

"I thought for the moment that you referred to the strain of insanity in my family, which prevents my asking any woman to be my wife," he said coldly. "No, don't protest," as Mark began an indignant denial. "I see you didn't."

"If you think me likely to do such a thing, I wonder you sit here with me," said Mark, rising, a little unbalanced by his afternoon's disappointment and the champagne."

"Sit down, man," said Hamilton, "you can't blame me for wincing when you touch my sore point, even if it is unintentional. I can't marry, because I must never have a child."

"Some people don't believe in heredity," muttered Mark, bold from excess of pity.

"Well, I won't run the chance," answered Hamilton. "No human being shall be brought into the world by my agency, to stand in my shoes. I know where they hurt."

"You've got heaps of things," said Mark awkwardly.

"I have at present," agreed Hamilton, "but what about the future? What have I to look forward to but a witless old age, when I shall be the prey of anyone who happens to be nearest? Why, that temptation to marry and hope for the best has been the only one that I've ever resisted; yet it's been the strongest. A son who might be a protector—I've wanted that!"

"So long as I live —" began Mark.

"Hush," said Hamilton, "you're younger than I am. You don't know what you're promising, nor how frail a bond the strongest friendship proves under the stress of time and circumstance. It snaps; it becomes nothing, even when the kindest memory remains."

"I don't believe that," said Mark.

"You won't believe it any more than you will believe that love is only mortal," said Hamilton. "But no man has any claim upon the future save in his children. Only through them can he have the faintest hold upon the time after."

Silence! While both men sat brooding over the untidy table with its dull glass and tarnished silver and the empty champagne bottle. The blind was up, and after a while the sound of heavy footsteps roused them. It was a knot of people from a class meeting at the chapel, trudging by with as much faith in the eternal mansions as in their little clustered homes at the lane end.

"Come," said Hamilton, rising abruptly, "there's something about this place that make's one so damned serious. Let's have a pipe in the other

room, and look over the last proofs of my novel; it's not serious. I hate your earnest, soul-searching fiction."

"So do I," said Mark; "but I never knew you wrote at all!"

"Oh, everybody writes now but the people who've something to say," answered Hamilton.

"What's it about?" Mark asked vaguely. "What made you think of writing it? It always seems like a sort of miracle to me. I couldn't write a book if my life depended on it."

"It's about a man that took all life brought with a laugh," Hamilton said. "Not a wry smile, nor a forced guffaw, but a real laugh. And so the world laughed with him. The whole book's full of laughter. But I shall never write another."

"Why not?" asked Mark. "If you can write one—"

"That's no reason why I should ever be able to do it again. My dear chap, there's nobody living who hasn't one book in them; the only thing is, that they miss the moment for writing it. Either they're too busy, or too happy, or too sad—anyway the moment goes. And once gone it never comes back. But the time comes to every man and woman when they could put down in words what they've wanted to be, and failed; so imperfectly that they themselves wouldn't recognise it, but well enough to reach somebody else, to sound real. I just happened to hit the moment."

"I expect mine's gone," said Mark.

Hamilton looked at him, shrewdly smiling.

"Yes," he said, "your moment passed when you went up to Cambridge and sat in your little dingy room that first night, meaning to storm the Universe. The sound of your mother praising God for your scholarship was still in your ears, and the world was simply crowded with things that looked splendid after Suddaby and Market Yarborough. You could have done it then."

"And now?" said Mark.

"Now," said Hamilton. "Oh, well, now you're in love with a princess, you see. That leaves room for nothing else."

"Don't chaff about that," said Mark shortly; "I wish I hadn't told you."

"But she is a princess—a princess of furbelows—isn't she?" laughed Hamilton.

Then Mark, who was not original, made the immemorial remark of the young man in love with a shop-girl, or a little dressmaker, or a chorus girl.

"She is a perfect lady."

He said it with such solemn dignity that Hamilton dared not smile.

"Without doubt," he responded gravely; then something rose up within him that he could not keep down.

"Good God, man! Don't you know Susan Drewery is a million times more than that? Why, she's the woman an Emperor would choose out of all the world to be the mother of his children—if he could. Don't you know it—don't you *feel* it?"

Mark arose, and replied with exceeding stiffness:

"I have never given that side of the question any consideration."

Hamilton's tense face softened, and he looked at Mark very kindly.

"I beg your pardon. Of course you haven't. Now let's go out for a turn," he said.

CHAPTER VII

BY-AND-BY came the end of harvest. For weeks Mark had lived in an atmosphere which was like a forcing-house to the impulsive, unbalanced side of his nature. The undisciplined desire to take the best of the moment and let the future go hang, which he had been rather ashamed of at Market Yarborough, now seemed like a virtue because Hamilton so thoroughly believed in it. And still there was nothing in what Hamilton said or did to influence anyone—it was what he *was*. From what he was, and the unconscious effect he produced, a man like Mark could never escape: every principle must have been fixed, not floating nebulously, for him to remain the same after two months spent with Hamilton.

On the very day that the last load of corn was carried, Hamilton's book appeared, then came a pause until the critics found time to read the work of a new man, and finally a perfect clarion cry of praise and blame, but mostly praise. For the world is so very tired of weeping with those who weep in fiction, that it seized ravenously upon the opportunity for laughter. The publisher, too, was requited for the many unprofitable ventures a great house must undertake for the sake of prestige, and he laughed

loudest of all, being most glad of the rare chance.

The only person who did not laugh was the author, because he had put all the broad and wholesome jollity, which is every man's heritage, into his book. All that ought to have been in his life was there—held apart—kept from the bitter taint that lay beneath all his real laughter. For his hero, Adam Hilarius, laboured under no heritage of madness from the past, no fear of degraded old age in the future. He was free to laugh in the wind and sun and buffets of the storm as a brave man should.

Hamilton sat with a new-bound copy of the book before him, in the long room facing the sea; and the thought nearest to him was that no son would ever say, "My father wrote it." The desire to have a son had become almost an obsession with him, because it was the one strong desire within his reach which he had denied himself. It loomed tremendous, as what we want and can't have always does, above the rest of things that are equally valuable and yet *there.*

As he sat turning the new leaves of the book that still smelt of printer's ink, Mark came in, very fit and sun-burned with the harvest work.

"This barley seems to be threshing out fine; there'll be a splendid yield to the acre," he said. "I think we shall finish to-night."

"Yes, I expect so," answered Hamilton; "I'm coming out again in a minute." He, too, showed signs of the harvest weather, though his skin was not easily tanned, like Mark's. "I want to look

at the bay mare. If she's all right we might go up to London next week. Marston's about again now, and all fear of infection from him is over. There's nothing for us to do now."

Mark had come in full of lusty air and sunshine and good spirits—but at those words, something seemed to sink like lead inside of him. "There's nothing for us to do now." Then there was nothing more for *him* to do. He had grown so used to his life there that, without thinking, he had begun to look on it as permanent—to see an endless visit of fresh springs and pleasant, toilsome harvests and quiet winters when a man might keep the rabbits down if he had nothing better to do. Hamilton was such a born master that he inspired people with the feeling that his interests were theirs, and would go on being theirs for all time. It was always a rude shock when his servants realised that he had got all he wanted out of them.

Mark hesitated for a moment before replying, to focus the swaying circumstances.

"Then I suppose you'll not be needing my services any longer?" he said, striving to keep his voice even.

"No, I think not," said Hamilton carelessly, for he had never seen any permanence in the arrangement. "I'm going away, myself, for a time, and Marston has always managed very well. I don't suppose it would answer to put another man over him."

"Of course not," said Mark, flushing through his tan. He did not wish to seem to be begging to remain. "I shall find a berth of some kind no doubt."

"Oh, easily enough now the thing's had time to blow over," assented Hamilton.

"I can never thank you—" began Mark.

"Don't talk like that, Branscombe," said Hamilton. "You happened to fill in a vacant place, which suited me, and also suited you. We've had a pleasant time together, with profit to us both. That's all there is in it."

But Mark would have to be a good deal older and very different to believe that Hamilton was just speaking the literal truth: his employer had a royal power of inspiring devotion and faith in return for passing favours which were never meant to be anything else.

"You're very good to put it in that way," said Mark; "but I shall not forget how you stood by me when I was in a hole."

"Well, I should have been bothered too, when Marston was taken ill, so now we're quits. There's no obligation on either side."

That was how Hamilton wanted it to be, he wanted always to be free of obligations, and that was why he had no real friends. But he had a genuine pleasure, too, in giving pleasure, when it suited him. It was only that he wouldn't be called upon to give anything when it did not suit him.

Therefore he was delighted with Mark's enjoyment of the dinner in the train, and the splendour of the hotel. The young man had a substantial cheque in his pocket—for Hamilton had been generous in his payment—and he looked about him with eyes used to the inn at Market Yarborough.

"Last time I was in London," he said, "I came with another grammar-school master, and we stayed at a boarding-house. I've never been in a place like this before. My word," his eye roved to several ladies in the lounge in evening dress, who were really neither so very young nor beautiful, "my word, you do see some fine women about here."

He meant no disrespect to Susy, but the place seemed simply full of princesses; yet that, somehow, made him want his particular princess more than ever.

"I — I wonder," he said, lighting a match with great care, "how you ask for young ladies in a shop when you call upon them."

Hamilton grinned as he stooped to pick up a paper.

"Well, I've heard that it's best not to ask at all. The safest plan is to hang about outside the establishment at closing time."

"Thank you," said Mark seriously. "That's what I'll do then. But," he added, after a pause, "there's unfortunately a cousin."

"That's awkward," agreed Hamilton. "A young or an old cousin?"

"What you'd call an uncertain age," replied Mark, with an anxious eye fixed on his companion. "I don't see how I'm to escape her. They'll be sure to live together. She—the cousin — is head fitter at Parkinson & Diver's."

"Oh, I've seen her then," said Hamilton.

"You!' said Mark.

"Yes. I've been in sometimes with a friend," said

Hamilton carelessly. "By Jove! I've got it. We'll ask them both to dine. You can't have anything more correct than that, I fancy; and I'll tackle the cousin."

Mark's heart swelled with gratitude as he went up to bed in the lift, and Hamilton smiled to himself at the thought of a novel amusement. It would be so awfully, intensely respectable. Then he grew very grave. The woman an emperor might choose to be the mother of his son— There was nothing funny in that thought.

The next day was fine, with only fog enough to make each street end mysterious, and when darkness came, with a thousand blurred lights glimmering through it, Parkinson & Diver's loomed up in front of Mark like a dungeon keep. Even the fact that he had gained the unfavourable notice of a policeman by his long wait, could not quiet the grand triumphal march with which the heart of every true lover awaits his lady.

"She's coming—she's coming—she comes!" And then the march stops for a breathless second before thundering on again.

That was how it happened to Mark when Susy came out of the side entrance of Parkinson & Diver's, her face turned towards him with the country colour faded, but the tender naturalness of her expression quite unchanged.

"Susy!" he cried.

"Mark!" she answered, standing still under the lamp.

She suddenly realised how long it was since she

had seen him, and how lonely London had been, and her lip trembled before she had time to remember her pride.

"Oh, Susy, how I've wanted—" he began.

Then she touched his arm quickly, and Miss Drewery came forward in black, with a hard, compact figure, and an extraordinary likeness to Miss Dimsdale in her little hat with red roses.

"You'll remember Cousin Ada?" Susy said nervously.

"Yes," said Mark, shaking hands without enthusiasm.

"She got me my place here," said Susy, attempting to round off the corners of the situation. "They think the world of her at Parkinson & Diver's."

"Oh, well," said Cousin Ada, preening in a metallic sort of way, "I do my duty; I don't claim more than that. But perhaps you'll walk along with us, Mr. Branscombe. The late dinner at our boarding-house is at half-past seven, and it'll take us all our time to drop in for the fish."

"I couldn't have afforded it," said Susy, to whom the slovenly dinner of five courses still seemed very grand, "but Ada's helped. She wanted me to be with her."

"I must say I believe in a head fitter keeping up her position," replied Miss Drewery. "A colonel's daughter sits next to us at table."

Mark turned and walked beside them, while she discoursed further on the obligations of a Position, and Susy, that word recalling her pride again, kept silence. It was for this, then, thought Mark, that he

had worked and waited and hoped all through the harvest time. How he hated Cousin Ada, and the Position, and even the impoverished colonel's daughter.

At last they turned down a dingy side street, and stood by the steps of a house that had once been fashionable, in a square that must have once been gay, though no one could believe it.

"Well," said Miss Drewery, offering her hand with great elegance, "we're glad to have met you, I'm sure. Good-evening!"

But Susy was too newly come from hospitable Suddaby to have learned town ways yet, and she could not refrain from crying out, in a sort of shocked haste:

"Oh, but you must come in and have some dinner! You can't go away just at a meal-time and have nothing."

Mark saw a stony look settle down on Miss Drewery's face, but he was desperate—what if she didn't want him? it was his last chance—he must go in.

So a few minutes later he sat at the long table and drank cold soup, in the midst of a row of derelicts such as he had never seen before. Even to his preoccupied gaze they seemed strange—the deaf colonel's daughter, in a grey shawl, picking disdainfully at the fish—the German clerk, who drank with a clucking noise like a pig—a seedy gentleman next to Mark, whose lifted eyebrow asked almost audibly, "How the devil did I get here?" in a vain effort to show he was different from the rest.

CHAPTER VIII

On the night of the dinner the weather chanced to be very fine. As Hamilton and Mark drove through the lighted streets, exhilarated Londoners went about rejoicing that they were back home again, and need not pretend to love the country any longer.

"I've taken a box for *The New Puritans* to-night," said Hamilton. "I thought it would be something to do after dinner, and there is so little plot in it that you can look in any time."

"That's splendid," said Mark, on the full tide of his week's pleasure. "Why, Miss Drewery will never get over it—a dinner first, and a box at the theatre afterwards. I should like to hear her talk about it to those queer people at the boarding-house."

The cab stopped then, and the two men alighted to wait near the swing doors until Miss Drewery and Susy drove up in a hansom. "If you *are* doing it, do it," was what cousin Ada had said, when they debated the difference in fare between that and the omnibus.

Hamilton's manner had never been more perfect than when he advanced to meet his guests. There was not the slightest touch of effusion or of distance on his part, to show that they were different from the people he usually entertained, and Miss Drewery,

who knew a fine manner when she saw it as women of her profession do, rose to the occasion. She became, in fact, the head fitter personified.

But Susy never dreamed it was manner, she took it for the man, and so regarded him as something greater than the common kind. This, then, was what fine London folk were like. The upper reaches of Society grew positively dazzling, viewed through this experience of them. She began to remember that old story about the house at Saltmarsh, until her heart, which had always been steeled against the first Mrs. Hamilton, began to grow pitiful.

After all—if kings and princes were like this!

Then she turned towards Mark and saw his eager eyes bent on her. Dear Mark. He stood much nearer to a country girl who was learning the dressmaking, and she loved him truly. But from that moment he dwindled a little, and was no longer high above her, because she realised, once and for all, that they belonged to the same class.

It was the same during dinner, where Hamilton put Mark forward, and only held himself ready to fill in the blanks, but still remained the centre of everything; and Susy's pride began to disappear minute by minute as she and Mark stood longer on the same level. Poor boy, why should he mean to insult her? Why shouldn't he want to marry her? He was only waiting, perhaps, until his prospects were more certain, and she smiled on him so sweetly when he passed the menu card that the silver letters danced.

Then his heart began to dance too, and he just touched her hand under the table.

Hamilton saw him do it, and noticed the pink colour rise into Susy's cheeks beneath her honest brown eyes with a sort of amused envy. Oh, to be young and in love, looking on your wedding-day as the gate of paradise—looking forward shyly to the children coming.

The amused look changed, deepened, as it rested on Susy, on her tall, rather short-waisted figure, her beautiful arms and shoulders, her candid forehead and heavy bright-brown hair. He suppressed a sigh.

Then he roused himself to discuss town topics with Miss Drewery, until she felt as if she were floating on air in a balloon made of coronets. Anything like the attitude of her elbows, and the sweep of her black satin train as they left the restaurant, had not been seen there for a very long time; and her happiness became almost overwhelming in the vestibule when she heard one waiter whisper behind his hand to another: "That's the Duchess of Waterhouse with Mr. Hamilton—I know her again from her picture in *Daily Scraps*." She, Ada Drewery, had been taken for a duchess!

The curtain had already gone up on *The New Puritans* when the party arrived, and twelve girls, in pale grey with a superfluity of hair and lingerie, danced before an enraptured audience. Even Susy's innocent eyes could not fail to see the way in which they advertised wares which respectable women are supposed to leave uncried, and their mixture of demureness and levity made her feel vaguely ashamed of her sex. But Hamilton and Mark liked it, and the music, the lights, the dialogue, with no appeal

to the intelligence, all created the atmosphere they were intended to create, which accounted for the fact that the piece was an immense success, and a box at short notice only procurable by chance.

It was an atmosphere to make all the seeds of Hamilton's unconscious planting grow up like gourds in a night, to make Mark look at Susy with a distant reverence no longer, but with a feverish determination to marry her whatever the consequences might be.

Every jangled verse, every sly allusion seemed to shout out to the serried white faces in the gloom of the stalls beyond the footlights:

"Eat. Drink. Make merry. Grasp all you can before your moment's gone."

And the dull, white faces, distorted by shadow, seemed to answer back:

"We have eaten. We have drunken. And—good God—can't you *see* how we're trying to make merry!"

Mark touched Susy's arm under cover of the dusk, and he seemed strange to her to-night; he disturbed the girlish tenderness which was all she had experienced of love before, and her gay serenity forsook her as he leaned towards her during the singing of some sugary doggerel by the principal tenor. It seemed beautiful to Mark and Susy as it floated on the top of orchestration far too good for it through the silent house—

> "Why should we be sighing
> Soon our day is dying—
> Seize the moment flying
> And kiss now, kiss now."

Then the twelve female puritans with pink stockings chorused faintly from a background of artificial moonlight:

"Kiss now—Ki-i-i-s-s now."

So twelve male puritans with turned down collars came forward and did so, while all the young men in the audience wanted to do the same.

"Susy," whispered Mark, as the comic man came in, "don't you wish you'd kept the green silk for to-night?"

"Ye-es," responded Susy.

After that she turned her attention resolutely on the stage, feeling, in her countrified way, that it was a want of courtesy to Mr. Hamilton to talk when he had paid for their seats; and Mark's whisper fixing a time and place to meet next day was the only other word she had with him in private.

It was twelve o'clock when she and Miss Drewery got back to the boarding-house, and as the economical management ordained lights out in the hall when the proprietress retired, they had to grope their way in, and find a candle to mount the musty stairs. They both went into Susy's bedroom, because it was a night you could not sleep upon without exchanging comments, and Cousin Ada announced from the bed's edge that the only thing which made her realise they had not been dreaming was the presence of "that young Branscombe."

"Your aunt gave me a hint in one of her letters," she said; "but I do hope, Susy, there's nothing in it. He hasn't a penny to bless himself with, and then all

that fuss at the Grammar School and getting into the papers. He's no match for you, my dear, and not the man for you to make a fool of yourself over either. Now, that might be the case with a gentleman like Mr. Hamilton—I could understand you there."

"Well, I don't want Mr. Hamilton," said Susy, "even if I'd the chance. But he would never look my way."

Miss Drewery took off the black satin cuirass and sat up very straight in her under-bodice, looking more astonishingly like Miss Dimsdale than ever now Miss Dimsdale was not there to compare her with, though together they were scarcely alike at all.

"Susy, you make a mistake," she answered solemnly. "Mr. Hamilton said that you were the sort of woman any man would wish his mother to have been like."

"Um," said Susy, "that isn't much, I think, considering his mother was the old man's cook."

"All the same," said Miss Drewery, "he's a gentleman anyone might want to marry."

"With madness in his blood?" said Susy.

"With madness and murder and suicide all rolled into one!" said Miss Drewery, her sallow face quite purple-red up to her frizzled black hair, as she went through the door.

For the terrible insistence of that *now* had stirred her to desperate longings. Poor Cousin Ada, she could no more escape than Mark or Hamilton or Susy.

But when she had locked her door and undressed, and opened the Bible which she read every night,

more as a kind of charm against evil happenings than from any deeper motive, her mind began to return to its usual state again. Insensibly she resumed her habit of unconscious, solid reliance upon eternity, and her grasp on time became less frenzied, for the habit of religion is so incalculably strong.

According to custom, she placed water and matches by the bedside, and turned out the light; then hovered undecidedly with one knee on the bed. She was dog-tired, but something urged her to go back to Susy's room, and at last she withdrew her knee from the tempting sheets and went.

"Susy," she whispered, after her knock met with the response of an opened door. "I've only come to tell you that I didn't mean what I said about Mr. Hamilton. I was only joking. Of course you mustn't think of him."

"Well, it is good of you to have come out again for that," said Susy, looking at the lined and weary face. "Good-night," and she kissed her cousin with unusual tenderness.

But Miss Drewery was irritable with fatigue and virtue mingled, and at no time liked kissing.

"Oh, do get off to bed and let me do the same," she said, "*we're* not idle young fellows on a holiday. We've got our work to do to-morrow, and we'd better forget to-night."

So Susy went to bed, but she knew quite well she could never forget it.

When work was over the next evening, she slipped out of the side entrance of Parkinson & Diver's without her cousin's knowledge, for she meant to meet

Mark whatever obstacles were thrown in her way, and preferred the inevitable row afterwards to one before. At least she would have had her walk and talk with her lover then, and no hard words could take that away. She stood poised on the edge of the pavement, ready to cross the road to the Marble Arch, dressed all in black with the shop-girl's uniform of a wide picture hat on her brown hair; but its flaring, turned-up shape was bent at the sides until it shaded her face something like a very old-fashioned bonnet. She had not yet acquired the dainty self-consciousness of the London women, which makes them trip and speak and feel as if they were always on a stage; and she held her long draperies gathered loosely in one hand.

It was thus that Mark caught sight of her.

"You've come, then," he said. "Oh, I was so afraid you wouldn't come. I've watched hundreds of tallish girls with brown hair walk under that seventh lamp-post, and I've started to meet them, and they weren't you after all."

"But I'm only five minutes late," laughed Susy.

"I was here before seven," he answered, "and it seemed like years."

Then they crossed the road in silence, he holding her arm; and the haunting, insistent echo of the "*now*" filled Mark's mind to the exclusion of all else.

"Susy," he whispered, as they walked along together in the dim quiet of the deserted park, "Susy, don't you know that every moment I wait for you must seem a year until you are my own

All night long I lay awake thinking of you, and all to-day you've come between me and everything I've looked at. I must have you, dear."

"Oh, Mark," said Susy, with a catch in her voice like a sob, "it's no use. You know it's not. But I'll never have anyone else, not if I live to be an old maid of a hundred."

"Darling, something's sure to turn up," cried Mark, too glad in that moment to think of anything but gladness, as a man should surely be for once in his life. "You'll see. We can be engaged for a little while, and then something is sure to turn up."

And Susy could not help thinking too, that something was; they felt, these two young people, as if the very stars in their courses *must* want to fight for them.

CHAPTER IX

MARK joined Hamilton in the hall of the hotel in such a glow and blaze of happiness that the blindest mortal must have seen it.

"Well," said Hamilton, "this is our last night, and we've had the good time I foretold, eh, Branscombe?"

"I'm sorry this is the last," said Mark, quite patently unable to be sorry about anything. Then he glanced at the people on the lounges with a more appraising eye than on that first evening. "I say, there isn't a woman here that's better looking than Miss Susan Drewery, is there?" he asked eagerly.

Hamilton rose, and glanced round too.

"These?" he said. "Why, she makes all other women look like old maids or midwives." Then he held out his hand. "I'm off by the early train, so this is good-bye."

"Oh, I shall get up and see you off," said Mark.

"Don't," answered Hamilton. "I hate being seen off, just as I hate leaving my address. When I go—I go. Good-bye, old chap; thanks for helping me to have a most pleasant time."

He walked away, leaving Mark planted there, as clean left out of his life as if the two had stepped at

once into separate hemispheres. Mark did not realise this; he only felt a blank sense of being left, which could not last long on the night when Susy had said she loved him. His belief in Hamilton remained undisturbed; he still made a hero of his master with all the fine loyalty of generous youth, and never dreamed that the older man's scheme of existence permitted no interference to his pleasure—that when Mark ceased to give pleasure, he would cease to be, so far as the other was concerned.

It was an ingrained principle with Hamilton that he had been denied much, and must seize all he could reach to make up for the loss—he had told himself this for so many years that even his generous impulses were warped and weakened by it. Only an immense faith could have kept the hereditary taint of madness from affecting his character, and there was no lamp burning in his life beneath the eikon; the wolf-howl: "What's the good?" only ceased when new sensations drowned it, and the red eyes of Despair were always glaring through an open door.

He was off again upon that ceaseless quest for something new when Mark arose next morning to a world made for the man whom Susy loved.

Immediately after breakfast, Mark went to the scholastic agents, feeling as if he wore a talisman that must bring success: and perhaps the glorious sense that the world was made for you is a talisman —the best of all.

Anyway, for the first time since Mark's dismissal from the Market Yarborough School, the agents

consented to put him on their list, and he met Susy that afternoon—it was Saturday—perfectly certain he should get an appointment after Christmas.

Miss Drewery could not remain in ignorance of all these meetings, and when Susy owned at last that she was "sort of engaged," a most disturbing letter went to Aunt Dimsdale. "If you want Jones to have the slightest ghost of a chance before it is too late, tell him to come up at once," wrote Miss Drewery, "and say he can stay the week-end with me as my guest. If a man can't do anything with an opportunity like that—"

It was really rather noble of Miss Drewery, for she treasured very highly her genteel position in the boarding-house, and she felt that Jones would make a horrid sensation among the derelicts. Jones and the colonel's daughter! Jones and the surprised retired officer! Even Jones and the boarding-house keeper, who never missed an "h" by any chance! These pictures printed themselves upon the night when Miss Drewery retired to rest after hearing that her guest would arrive next day, and kept her awake for hours, but she never wavered.

Jones arrived just in time for dinner, and Miss Drewery, who had made a special point of Susy's being in, without telling her of the expected guest, went forward to meet him in a best gown. She had to put on something to carry off Jones' draught-board tweeds and the booming, strident voice with which he was wont to rally the farmers when he wanted another bid.

When they got to table it was worse—much worse. He did not know the meaning of the word reticence, and made extravagant compliments to Susy that caused the gas globes to quiver to the echo. The colonel's deaf daughter asked if it were thundering, and the retired gentleman's eyebrow inquired more acutely than ever, what the devil he was doing here?

"We seem likely to have a good winter season. I noticed in the paper this morning that the Duke and Duchess of Waterhouse had returned to town," gasped Miss Drewery, purple to her frizzled hair.

Jones winked, he was loud but not foolish.

"Think I shall drop in and see them after church to-morrow, there's no sherry and biscuits like that you get at the Waterhouse's," he said gravely. "Last time I was there I—"

"Mr. Jones," said Miss Drewery desperately, "the waiter is offering you wine."

The German who always bore the name of Fritz, but changed in person as soon as he had learned a smattering of English, was in the first and most Teutonic stage.

"Roth - wein?" he observed contemptuously. He had already the deepest contempt for all English, but particularly those at the boarding-house, because they were so polite to him.

"Roth - wein?" he repeated, holding the bottle of curious chemical products called Grape Burgundy.

Jones put an enormous red hand over his glass.

"Not if I know it," he remarked. "Bottle of beer, please."

A shudder ran through the derelicts who drank

plain water mostly at table, whatever they did elsewhere, and the boarding-house keeper said firmly:

"Wines are not provided at this establishment, and that is Miss Drewery's private bottle of Burgundy. But Fritz can fetch you anything you please, during the fish-course, from the public-house."

Jones looked round the table.

"Seems to me that what we want is a glass of cham:," he said decidedly. "Put a bit of life into us." Then he threw himself back and fingered his heavy chain. "I'll just skip this soup and run round to the public myself, they'd give this German Johnny anything, but your's truly's seen a label and cork before."

"He'll have seen more than that—more than that—his nose proves it," said a little meek old lady at the end of the table, to the intense surprise of everybody. But hot water was a creed with her, and she had the courage of it.

During the short space of time that Jones was absent, Miss Drewery endured the tortures supposed to belong to an after-existence. Red flames of fire seemed to be running up and down her person to settle in her nose and temples—it was awful. And Susy sat flushed and wide-eyed, dreadfully uncomfortable at such an infringement of the proprieties before all these most superior people, who spoke with a south-country accent and ate everything with a fork.

"Oh, Cousin Ada, why did you let him come?" whispered she, unaware of the invitation. "You could have told him there wasn't room here—

because there wasn't—for him. And there are hundreds of places in London where he could have stayed."

"I did it for the best," answered Miss Drewery, gulping down a mouthful of fish.

There was a clatter in the hall, and Jones entered, breathless and heated, but bearing a magnum of champagne of undoubted brand, ready opened, and followed by a menial from the public-house with three more like it.

Before you could say "knife," he had, with a quickness and dexterity in seizing chances that was part of his trade, gone round the grey, dreary table, and filled the empty wine-glasses with the sparkling wine.

"Sir, I beg—" said the retired gentleman, with dignified reproof.

"Nonsense. Going to drink the health of the King. Must all of us do that," cried Jones.

The derelicts felt their mouths water as the fumes of the wine mounted to their senses, and their judgment unconsciously softened. After all, this man was probably a rough colonial just come home to spend his pile. Why spoil his simple pleasure? And to get anything in that house you didn't pay for—

The colonel's deaf daughter closed the incident.

"Mad—but generous," she said, in a perfectly audible tone, drinking off her glassful. "The brand my poor dear papa died of, sir," she continued, addressing Jones. "Not that it's bad in itself, you know, but too much of it."

"Can't have too much of a good thing," said Jones absently. "Hi—you waiter—draw another bottle."

When presently the derelicts floated up into the drawing-room they were scarcely recognisable, excepting the meek little old lady, and she went straight to bed.

Jones produced cards and began to perform various tricks with them, everybody was in a state of glowing appreciation, and Miss Drewery sat down with a sense of triumph.

"There," she said to Susy, "young Branscombe couldn't have carried it off like that."

"He wouldn't want to," said Susy indignantly. Then she added with an effort: "He's coming in to-night."

"What for?" snapped Miss Drewery.

"To tell me whether he has got the situation he went to see about to-day," answered Susy.

"Oh, a hundred a year, and see that the boys put clean collars on," said Miss Drewery sharply. "That's a nice future for a girl."

"I shouldn't have anything to do with the collars," laughed Susy, "and I'd live with him on bread and cheese—so there! Besides, it's a mastership in a day school."

"Hope he won't get it," muttered Miss Drewery.

But Mark came in soon after with such a radiant face, and such a general, shining hopefulness about him, that she saw at once he had succeeded, even before he spoke to Susy.

"Susy," he said, going straight up to her and taking her hand, "I've got it."

Jones ceased his card tricks and joined the group.

"Got what?" he asked, without any false delicacy. He wanted to know, and he asked.

"A mastership," said Branscombe loftily, for he was aware that Jones dared to admire his beloved.

"A situation! I thought it was a fortune from your looks," laughed Jones unpleasantly.

"So it is—to me," retorted Mark.

"Oh, have you got Eton?" said Jones, incensed by Mark's supercilious manner, and labouring under the disadvantage of having taken more champagne than was quite wise, so that Fritz should not consume it.

"No," said Mark, glancing at Susy, and then at the amused faces of the derelicts, who were evidently laughing at him with the half-intoxicated auctioneer. He would turn the laugh—he would. "No," he continued, "but the post enables me to claim what's worth more than either Eton or a fortune to both you and me, Jones. It enables me to announce my engagement to Miss Susan Drewery."

He seemed to himself and to Susy to grow as he said that, he was so very grandiose, but Jones lost all sight of the manner in the matter.

"To Miss Susan Drewery," he said, turning upon Cousin Ada like an infuriated bull; "is this the truth? Has there been an understanding between them?"

"Ye-es," said Miss Drewery, with an eye on the interested derelicts, who had never had such an evening. "Shall we adjourn to the dining-room, it is empty now?"

"No," roared Jones, "we'll stop here. I don't care who knows how I've been treated. Brought up to London on false pretences, and sat with a lot of old scarecrows, guzzling at my expense. Bah!—it's shameful."

"Nobody asked you to come," said Susy, roused to the rescue of her cousin.

"Didn't they?" gasped Jones. "*Didn't they?* Now, Miss Drewery, did you invite me or did you not?"

"Ye-es," owned Cousin Ada again.

"Then why the devil did you?" demanded Jones, with some justice.

"I acted for the best," said Miss Drewery, beginning to weep. "It looks strange, I know, but indeed I meant to give you your chance with Susy. I wanted you to have her. I thought you'd make her a good husband."

"And you don't now?" sneered Jones.

Cousin Ada put down her handkerchief, and her little black eyes flashed.

"No, I don't," she said, marching out.

So poor Jones, who really had a good deal to complain of, took the night train back to Market Yarborough; and Miss Drewery said she should never do a kindness to anybody any more as long as she lived.

But oddly enough her position at the boarding-house improved, and she was regarded as the friend of eccentric but generous millionaires. Jones loomed for ever in the imagination of the derelicts with a golden halo of champagne corks about his head, and the colonel's deaf daughter often asked if he were coming back.

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CHAPTER X

ALL that November, Mark and Susy continued to meet after the shop closed, and to walk up and down the fog-haunted paths of the park, which never seemed either cold or damp or anything that they really were. Mark filled the long empty days in his one bed-sitting-room, or in the streets, by thinking of the night, and he became in love as absolutely without reason as a young man may, who has no work to do.

Susy had her daily occupation, and that kept her steadier, more balanced; but her love for Mark had in it a sort of kindness that made her hate to refuse anything she had to give that would make him happier—and he was most anxious to be married before Christmas, so that they could go together into lodgings when he took up his new situation.

"No, we *must* wait a little," sighed Susy. "Time to think of marrying when you have settled down and seen how you like it."

"Then you don't love me as I love you," answered Mark. "You'd never talk about waiting if you did."

"Oh, Mark, everybody's against it. I should have to fly in the face of Aunt Dimsdale and all the friends I've ever known," pleaded Susy. "You want too much, dear."

"I want everything in the world. I want you," said Mark.

At last, of course, Susy gave in, not because she wished to do so, but because she hated to refuse the best gift she had to the lover who wanted it.

Now all young people long to look romantic, and have very few chances of gratifying that desire, which is the reason why many of them marry against the wishes of their elders. The chance to fling down the gauntlet and do something finely heroic is too good to be missed, and they feel it's they two against a dragon-world, like any knight and damsel of old. Even Susy felt like that when she and Mark came out of the dingy London church, followed only by Miss Drewery in her third best costume, very red about the eyes and nose: and Mark felt enormous—a dragon-slayer of the grandest type.

But it never can seem heroic to carry your lady off in a four-wheeler in company with a cousin in black cloth and a swollen nose, who is obviously not really of the crying sort, but now is unable to restrain her tears. Mark realised, even in his state of intoxicated bliss, that dragon-slayers should not stand silent sniffing.

"Come, Cousin Ada," he said, "do either cheer up or have it out with me. This is simply awful. Anyone would think I was going to murder Susy."

Miss Drewery gulped.

"I'm sorry to seem a damper," she said, "but I can't help it. When I think what Susy might have done—a nice home of her own—and a proper wedding at Suddaby—and now *this!*"

She buried her nose in her handkerchief.

"A schoolmaster with a degree is as good as an auctioneer any day," retorted Mark, nettled.

"Leaving out the difference in the men themselves," abetted his new wife.

"Well, I'm thinking about Aunt Dimsdale, too," continued Cousin Ada. "After all she's done for you, bringing you up and all, and now for her not to see you married. Boo-hoo!"

Cousin Ada was, as she expressed it, "worked up."

"She was asked often enough," said Susy, also beginning to weep. "I'm sure I feel it more than ever you can, Ada. I can think of nothing else but her sitting at home by herself and thinking about us."

"She won't be doing that," said poor Mark, very angry and miserable. "She'll be bustling round as she always is, Susy. Don't cry, dear."

"I—I can't help it," sobbed Susy.

He sat after that in silence, glaring miserably from his weeping wife to his weeping cousin-in-law until he could endure it no longer.

"Look here!" he said, turning fiercely upon Miss Drewery, "why did you ever come if you were going to be like this? You're spoiling our wedding-day. Don't you know that? You're spoiling the only wedding-day we shall ever have." Then he caught Susy's startled glance, and added more peaceably: "*Can't* you cheer up?"

"I'll—I'll do my best," gulped Miss Drewery, giving her eyes a last mop up, and putting away her handkerchief. "I don't want to be unkind, I'm sure; but I can't feel j-jolly."

Fortunately the cab drew up at the boarding-house then, or she would have been off again. With the appearance of Fritz, however, she resumed her normal composure, but did not try to disguise the signs of woe. It was the correct thing for somebody to cry at a wedding—if not a mother, the next nearest female relative—and she had done the correct thing as she always did, so there was nothing to be ashamed of; on the contrary.

Susy's box was placed on the cab, while she and Mark went inside to partake of the repast which Miss Drewery had provided, although it was still only half-past ten in the morning; and in the hall stood a package addressed in Aunt Dimsdale's handwriting.

"Oh, Mark, Mark," sobbed poor, overwrought Susy, "she's forgiven us. She's sent a present after all."

"No time to open it now," urged Mark, "we shall miss the train."

"I'd miss fifty trains. Oh, Mark, she's the only mother I've ever known."

She was down on her hands and knees already, feverishly tearing off the wrappings; for she had not defied her aunt because she did not love her—only because she loved Mark more.

He knelt down beside her, and when they brought to light a big wedding-cake, and a patchwork quilt with a green silk border to it, they stood up very moved and tender, like two children who have been in disgrace and been forgiven. They were even able to eat something, having had no breakfast, with the quilt hung over a chair and the cake before them.

Miss Drewery went out to tell Fritz to remove the wrappings, and she found a note pinned to the paper which had covered the cake.

"With Aunt Dimsdale's love," it ran. "No Drewery was ever married with a bought cake, and I could not let the niece I had brought up be the first. Be sure to keep it in a tin."

As Susy read it she felt all had gone normal and right again—that was the real Aunt Dimsdale—part of the old peaceful life of her girlhood, with its long procession of summers and winters, that even now began to stretch behind her like those pleasant, sunny fields we wander through, without knowing until afterwards how sweet they were.

"Dear old Suddaby," she said, knowing for the very first time that it was dear.

"Why, I thought you found it dull, and liked London best," said Miss Drewery.

"Well, so I did. So I do," hesitated Susy, "and yet—"

She stopped short at a loss, for she could not explain how she was glancing across those pleasant fields, because she did not know it. But the pieces of green silk in the quilt border seemed to belong to a time of hope and peace and uncertainty that was a hundred years ago.

Cousin Ada, moderately cheerful now, saw them off at the railway station, and was horrified to find that they had not secured rooms at Brightholme, the sea-side village where the honeymoon was to be spent.

"Funds don't run to that," laughed Mark, flushed

and excited. "Susy thought we should make a better bargain on the spot."

At last they were off—they two with the world behind them—the dull, slain, dragon-world.

When they arrived at Brightholme they left their luggage in charge of the porter, and went off to look for rooms with the adventurous glee of two children who have run away from grown-up people. But nothing was to be had there in the way of lodgings at all.

"This comes of picking out little places at random, thinking they'll be cheap," said Susy. "Now what are we going to do?"

"Let's try the inn," said Mark.

"It's sure to be dear," said Susy. "Inns always are dearer than private lodgings."

"Never mind, we must chance it," said Mark. "I've still got all the money Mr. Hamilton paid me, and twenty pounds I saved at Market Yarborough."

So they turned into the inn yard, and the white railings, the privet hedge, the leafless elm-tree, all loomed as mysterious and wonderful in the gathering gloom of the December afternoon as unfamiliar places do to children. And the landlady who came out to welcome them was not a real landlady at all, but a person in a fairy tale who was going to show them the magic way to an enchanted land.

Even her very earthly remark that the bar was full up, and so was the taproom, but they could have a sit-down tea with ham and eggs in the kitchen while she aired the spare chamber, could not make them see her as she was, and they quite forgot to ask about the price.

"I'll send for your luggage," she said, viewing them with the careless indifference of all inn-keepers within a hundred miles of London in these motoring days. "Maybe you'll like to come and see the room," she added to Susy; "but it's the only one we have."

So Susy followed the magic landlady upstairs, and came down again with flushed cheeks and tidy hair to eat her first meal alone with her husband. There was a good deal of bustling in and out of the kitchen, but no one took particular notice of them. Every now and then a wave of sound, and an extra smell of beer denoted the opening of doors in the taproom or bar. Hot water and lemons were fetched once, and another time some cheese and biscuits. It was evidently Saturday night in a country public-house, and as they finished their meal, the landlady bustled through with a tray of soiled glasses.

"You've soon done," she said; "was it to your liking?"

"Very good indeed," said Mark, to whom sawdust would have been delicious.

"Fine weather for the time of year," she said mechanically, though the rain now fell outside.

"Splendid!" Mark answered.

CHAPTER XI

IT is all very well to take rooms from a magic landlady at an enchanted inn without considering terms, but when the landlady drops her magic and becomes simply a fat person with a keen eye to business, and the inn settles down into a plain "Blue Boar," rather noisy in the evenings, things take on a different aspect; especially when there is only a very limited exchequer.

However, even that fall from fairyland will not shake the joy out of two young people in love; and the time had nearly come for Mark and Susy to move to Scarsby, the little town where their home would be for the future.

"We must go there a few days before the beginning of the term, and get settled into our rooms," said Susy, with all the tender hopefulness of a young wife looking forward to her first home, wherever it may be. "We can do without much attendance, that's one advantage of marrying a girl like me, Mark."

"Oh, it won't do for you to scrub and sweep, and so on," said Mark, with anxious authority. "You'll have to try and be like the other masters' wives."

"Am I to let you sit down to the bad cooking you get in cheap lodgings just for *looks?*" demanded Susy.

"You'll have to think of what people will say," answered Mark. "Nobody shall point a finger at my wife. Susy—" he hesitated. "Susy—I wouldn't mention you'd ever been a dressmaker. I think all the better of you for it, dear, but—" he looked at her deprecatingly.

"Oh, I won't mention it, dear," said Susy gently. "I quite understand."

One morning, four days after that, they sat at breakfast in the bar-parlour according to custom, and glanced at the wintry road down which the postman was struggling with the letters. The landlady brought one in for them.

"It's from the head-master, he wants me to go over to-day to see him," said Mark. "I suppose there are some arrangements to make."

"You can see about rooms, then," said Susy.

A little pause followed.

"Susy," said Mark abruptly, "I hope there's nothing wrong. I hope I'm not going to lose the berth."

"Nonsense," laughed Susy, "they know all about the row at Market Yarborough—why should you lose it? Of course you won't; especially as they've already seen you. Nobody could think you were really hard or unkind who had once seen you."

She spoke with such loving assurance that Mark began to feel certain too, and his manner on entering the head-master's presence was so inspired by this belief that the much-tried gentleman groaned within himself. How on earth was he going to dash to the ground such youthful buoyancy and faith? It was

perfectly odious, and his irritable schoolmaster's nerves quivered until he lost his temper at the very start.

"Good-day, Mr. Branscombe," he said, without a smile. "You are aware that I am only temporarily head here, until Dr. Mathewson returns from Egypt, whither he has been sent for his health. And I have yesterday received a letter from him disapproving of your appointment. I wanted to give you a chance, but he objects to it—fears for the prestige of the school, which is a sort of god to him—so, of course, I can only acquiesce. You see for yourself."

"Is the Market Yarborough affair the only reason, sir?" said poor Mark, going very white.

"The chief reason," said the master. "But Dr. Mathewson also objects to a married man on such a small stipend. We always engage unmarried men for our junior masters. I'm deeply sorry I ever sent for you in the first instance, Mr. Branscombe, but you did not inform me then that you meant to marry, and I had followed your case in the papers with much interest. I wanted to give you another chance. I can only say how truly I regret having only added to your troubles. Your term's salary will, of course, be forwarded to you, but that's nothing." He did not say that he was giving it out of his own pocket, though far from a rich man himself. "Something might have been arranged, perhaps," he concluded, "if you had been a single man."

"Nobody could object to my wife," said Mark, standing very straight. "She's everything that's

good and—" Poor lad, he broke off suddenly. He was so woefully disappointed and upset.

"I am sure she is," said the head, very kindly. "Nobody could dream of thinking otherwise. But a wife and a young family on a hundred and twenty a year can't add to the outside dignity of a master at this school, so Dr. Mathewson believes. You have to remember the possible children, you know, and how they'll take what you should spend on making a decent appearance."

"There mayn't be any," muttered Mark.

"But there's the Market Yarborough affair, which my principal sees differently from myself," said the head patiently—very patiently for him. "I'm very sorry. I sincerely regret having ever raised false hopes in you; but I'm afraid, Mr. Branscombe, you'll have to turn your thoughts to some other career."

"It's all very well for you," cried poor Mark—"for you, standing there, safe and well-established, to talk of another career. Where am I to find it? Here I marry on the strength of the appointment you give me, and you calmly talk about another career as if you were advising a boy to take up French instead of Latin. But of course it doesn't matter to you. You're all right."

The head-master's irritated nerves became uncontrollable beneath the pressure of his self-reproach and pity; and he said what he never meant to say. Schoolmasters are like that in private life because of the superhuman self-control they have to exercise in school hours.

"Doesn't matter to me!" he exclaimed. "Why, I'm paying you that term's salary out of my own pocket because my principal would do nothing. That's just what it matters to me, my dear sir, and I'm not rolling in wealth myself."

"Then you'd better keep my salary in your pocket," said Mark; "I won't accept it. It will be returned if you forward it by post. Good-day."

He marched out with colours flying; but the head-master cooled down before he was out of sight, and watched him with kind eyes as if it were one of his own big lads going down the drive.

"It's a pity—a great pity," he murmured uneasily. "I like the chap. He walked out with his head in the air, as a plucky lad should when things look pretty evil. I shall send the cheque, all the same, and his wife will persuade him to keep it—they always do."

But Susy must have been different, for the cheque did come back by return of post. Susy and Mark did not know the bitter necessity yet of taking money at the expense of everything but honour. That only comes when all life has grown absolutely real.

They moved at once to a little lodging which they managed to find with the wife of the stableman of the "Blue Boar," and Mark wrote dozens of letters, and spent a great deal of money on agencies and advertisements, but he could hear of nothing. The case at Market Yarborough had been made so publicly sensational in the newspapers that even the cheapest schools were afraid of him. Parents—the dread and hope, the fluttering, easily-scared

quarry of all schoolmasters—would be frightened away never to return at the mere mention of Mark Branscombe; and Mark refused the sly suggestion of one old hedge-schoolmaster, at a remote spot in Lincolnshire, that he should go under an assumed name. He'd done nothing to be ashamed of—he would not slink away from his own reputation!

"Very well then, don't," said the old gentleman, "but you can't expect me to take you as things are. I chanced to mention your name to the vicar, and he recalled the circumstances at once."

So Mark returned to Brightholme earlier than he expected, and found Susy out, walking to pass away the afternoon. It was April now, the period of holiday before the summer term. The days had slipped by so like one another that Mark and Susy scarcely realised the flight of time, for they were very, very happy, excepting when they were very, very miserable. And the miserable hours were only like thunder-clouds, soon passing, on the brightness of a perfect day.

But this afternoon the sun both outside and in was clouded as Mark walked along to meet his wife. He was very tired and hungry, and had unreasonably hoped to find her waiting for him, and the mongrel from the "Blue Boar" followed him, snapping and yapping at his heels. It was a vicious hound, and hated tramps, loafers and other dogs, not with sporting animosity, but personal vindictiveness.

"Get off home," shouted Mark fiercely.

But the more a person wished to be rid of the "Blue Boar" dog, the more it desired to remain, and it

ran round Mark in a series of narrowing circles until he overtook Susy. At the sound of his voice she turned round sharply, and went very pale.

"Well?" she said, in a low tone, with big, anxious eyes fixed on his. "Well?"

"I haven't got it," Mark blurted out, all the misery of the past hours coming to a head.

"Oh, Mark, my poor boy," Susy cried, "why wouldn't they have you?"

"Don't ask me now," said Mark, moving away from her. He was too sore even to bear her comforting. "I'll tell you about it when we get indoors."

So they battled back against the wind separately, the dog yapping about their fluttering garments, and a whirl of dust in their faces from an approaching motor-car, which the dog, in a very frenzy of viciousness, made an attempt to stop.

One moment it stood with tail erect, asserting its absolute right to that road, and the next Mark flung it into the hedge, while he jumped panting and breathless in its wake. The occupants of the car remarked that they'd nearly killed a good man for the sake of a bad dog; they also used other adjectives, having nearly overturned the car in their efforts to avoid manslaughter, but the dog sat up immediately, and began barking after the car as if he had performed a feat to be advertised. Susy swayed so that she had to catch hold of Mark's arm to steady herself, and he put his hand over hers, stirred out of his depression by the moment's excitement.

"Hold up, little girl," he said tenderly; "there's nothing to be frightened of now."

"Oh, Mark, you might have been killed," she gasped; "and all for that horrid, horrid dog. You might have been killed before my eyes for the sake of a dog that isn't even nice. Oh, I can't bear to think of it."

"Then don't, dearest," soothed Mark. "It's all over now. I did it on the spur of the moment—without thinking."

"That's what you always do," said Susy, rather unhinged, and out of temper consequently for the first time since they had been married. "You always act first on the impulse of the moment and leave the thinking until afterwards."

An odd look crossed Mark's face, he grew suddenly very quiet.

"Do you regret that I'm like that?" he asked. "We shouldn't be man and wife but for that, you know, Susy."

"Of course I don't regret it," said Susy, who was still sick and trembling. Then she drew a long breath. "Do let's get in out of this awful wind."

But Mark could not know how she was feeling, and thought her vexed and unsympathetic. Surely she needn't cut up rough after a day such as his had been. So they went into the cottage without talking any more; it all looked most particularly real on that windy April afternoon, the magic seemed to have absolutely departed.

After a meal, however, things seemed brighter, and Mark gave a full account of the day's doings.

"It seems to go against you, being a married man," said Susy wistfully. "They none of them

like you having a wife. That nice head-master at Scarsby was the same about it."

Mark hesitated, and kicked the fender.

"Oh, well, I didn't tell you at the time," he said; "but it wasn't so much the wife that man minded, it was the possible children."

He was staring at the fire, so did not notice how Susy's face went crimson and faded again.

"And you—wouldn't you like any, dear?" she faltered.

"Deuced inconvenient just at present," he said, lighting his pipe.

Cold and disappointment, and no food all day, had left him still matter-of-fact.

Susy jumped up in a sort of flaming pride and anger, not for herself, but for the one who was not wanted.

"But I'm glad," she cried. "Glad as that woman was in the Bible when she stood up and sang, 'My soul doth magnify the Lord!' I'm every bit as glad and proud as that."

Mark stood up too, and put his arm round her. He was shaken to the foundations of his being, but only with the thought of her part in it all.

"Susy. My dearest little girl. My poor little woman," he murmured, pressing his cheek against her own. "I'd never have said that if I'd dreamed—"

"Don't pity me," she cried, starting away from him, that odd pride of hers all up in arms. I don't want pity. I'm proud—proud."

Then she threw herself on the bed and burst into a tempest of weeping.

He sat by her, soothing her very tenderly in spite of his own heaviness and disappointment, for he loved her dearly. But he felt no joy in the prospect of being a father—a sort of boyishness in him kept the paternal instinct quite dormant for the present, and he remembered with wonder Hamilton's desire for a son as he watched there by his wife until she fell into an exhausted sleep.

After that he went out to the end of the little garden, and stood leaning on the gate, watching a tree opposite creak and wave dimly against a black sky. There were neither stars nor moon, and the dusty wind blew stronger than ever.

After all, Hamilton was right, he thought. Love was no immortal fire made by God, but just a blind instinct made by Nature to populate the world. Men and women were just born to give birth to a new generation, and to feed it and protect it until it could stand alone, and then themselves go forth into nothingness.

CHAPTER XII

It was when Cousin Ada came to Brightholme with a week-end ticket that the inn, and the little house, and the straight, long walk to the sea, became finally and irrevocably real—the last touch of magic fled as she knocked at the cottage door, and asked if Mrs. Branscombe were at home.

"They're in there," said the woman of the house, pointing at the startled faces of Susy and Mark in the doorway of the one sitting-room; then she retired, and Miss Drewery came forward alone because her host and hostess had not recovered themselves sufficiently to greet her.

"Well," she said, "so this is where you are. I'm starting my holidays to-day, and go down to Aunt Dimsdale's on Monday, and I simply had to have some news to take her. You've never said in your letters why Mark didn't go to that situation at Scarsby, nor anything. Your letters might have come out of the complete letter-writer for all they told. Four sides of the sheet maybe, but only, 'hoping you're well as this leaves me at present,' for the meaning of it all."

She paused, not for want of matter, but for want of breath; the pent-up curiosity and indignation and real kindness within her would have carried her on,

so far as that went, for twenty-four hours at a stretch. Her quick eyes noted the remains of such a frugal meal, and such cheapness and sordidness in their humble lodging, that the situation became almost clear to her as she spoke. Mark was out of work—the worst thing a man can be, next to being in disgrace or dead.

"Oh, Cousin Ada," said Susy, regaining her wits, "how did you find us out? What made you come?"

"That's a nice welcome," said Miss Drewery, drawing off her excellent and well-fitting kid gloves. "I've told you why I came, and the people at the inn gave me this address. I thought you were still there." She glanced keenly at Susy's pale, pinched looks. "I've got another plan now, though," she went on. "I'm going to take Susy with me for a week as my companion. I hate travelling alone, and she'll be my visitor, you understand."

"We haven't come to that pass that we can't afford a railway ticket if we want it," said Mark, flushing. "If my wife wants to go and see her aunt she can pay for her own ticket, thank you, Cousin Ada."

"But I'm not going. I never thought of such a thing," cried Susy. "Nothing would make me go at present."

"Not if it would be a great comfort and pleasure to the woman who brought you up, and who's been worrying about you?" asked Cousin Ada. "You go and show her you're all right and she'll believe it, but she never will without seeing you."

"No," said Susy, glancing at her husband whom she would not desert in this hour for all the world.

"No. It's impossible, Cousin Ada, though I know you mean well, and I do thank you very much. It was good of you to come—more than we could have expected—more than we've deserved of you. But we didn't want anybody here. We wanted to be left alone."

"Well," said Miss Drewery, flushing, "I have to care a lot about a person when I won't leave them alone. I expect you're aware of that. I'm not of the on-coming sort as a rule; but I've always taken to you, Susy. I wanted you in London because I liked you, and now you're going down to Suddaby for the bit of change and feeding up you need, whether you wish it or not."

"Dear Cousin Ada," said Susy, very kindly, "you've always been good to me; but I *can't* go."

"Yes, go, Susy," said Mark suddenly. "It will do you good, and I can take the work I spoke to you about."

"What work?" demanded Cousin Ada, whose curiosity and kindness were about equal.

"Farm labourer's work—the only kind that is plentiful enough and unskilled enough for me to obtain," said Mark, flashing round on her in a great heat. "Now you know. I've already made inquiries. There's a place I can go to as gathman on Monday at seventeen shillings a week."

"And I can keep house splendidly on that," said Susy, her brave head up. "Splendidly!"

"A labourer," gasped Miss Drewery, with a horror incomprehensible to those who do not know that a gulf as wide as that between a private and an officer

flows between a farmer and his hands—and there is no bridge. "A common labourer! Oh, Mark, you'll never stand it."

"I should stand worse if I went to the colonies, and never think twice about it," said Mark. "That's what we shall do—after—" he paused.

"Ah!" said Miss Drewery, becomingly glancing down; "just so."

"So you see," said Susy, with a cheerful finality, "we thank you for your very, *very* kind offer, but I can't leave at present."

Miss Drewery, staring at her bony fingers and considering, was extraordinarily like her aunt, and after a while got up and began to deliver her ultimatum.

"Well, if you won't come you won't; but in that case I shall tell my own tale—not yours. I shall say, plain out, that I found you on your beam ends with Mark just going to take a place as common labourer. How'll you like that to go the round of the country-side, and come to the ears of the Grammar School Committee? Why, they'll just nudge one another and laugh and remark that they did right to get rid of Mark. How will your pride stand that, Susy?"

"Ah, you needn't think you'll get me that way, Cousin Ada," cried Susy, all aflame with anger and pity and indignation. "You needn't think that will take me to Suddaby when love and gratitude to Aunt Dimsdale couldn't."

"Then you want people to know! Then you're proud of being married to a common gathman!"

interrupted Miss Drewery, stirred to a forgetfulness of all her town polish, and speaking in the broad Suddaby tongue of her childhood. "Oh, Susy, I little thought you would ha' come to this when you and me were having late dinner together at the boarding-house for the first time. I thought I was going to pull you up to my level. And now you seem not to care how you sink—you can't hold up a finger."

"Not if it makes me seem ashamed of Mark," said Susy. "Why—I should be proud of him if he'd robbed—if he'd murdered—I should know he'd meant it right." And she went away into their little bedroom before she should be tempted to say more, for her self-control was not what it had been.

"It's too bad, Cousin Ada," Mark burst out, as the door closed. "Surely she has enough to bear without you—"

Miss Drewery held up a bony, commanding hand as she was wont to do at the young ladies in Parkinson & Diver's workroom.

"Stop," she said. "You're a young man. You know *nothing*. Susy is just on the verge of a breakdown, and if she doesn't get away with me for a change, and a good nursing up, I won't answer for the consequences. Her mother died when her first child was born; do you want Susy to do the same?"

Miss Drewery turned purple as she spoke, but neither an exaggerated sense of decorum nor any other consideration would stop her saying what she thought when she meant to say it.

"You—you don't think—you don't mean?" gasped Mark.

"Now, you're getting into a flutter," said Miss Drewery. "I don't mean anything but that Susy wants a rest and a change. She's not fit to rough it with you until she has had one—that's all."

"I'll go now and tell her to get ready," said Mark, jumping up. "If you want her to travel with you she can do so. I'll help her to pack, and tell the man from the 'Blue Boar' to fetch her boxes to-night—he won't have time first thing on a Monday morning. Oh, of course, I must get her off at once," and he was out in the passage almost before Miss Drewery had time to seize him by his flying coat-tails.

"Really," she said, panting slightly, as she closed the door on them both again, "you are no more fit to be a husband, Mark, than the boarding-house cat. You mustn't seem to want her to go for her own sake, but for yours, so that you can have a free hand when you first get to your situation. Make out it'll be a help to you, her going. You mustn't say a word that could possibly startle or alarm her."

Well, he succeeded so splendidly that Susy set off for Suddaby on Monday morning, heart-broken at the conviction that he was not sorry to part with her. She was perhaps inclined to be unreasonable just then, or she might have seen more clearly, and Miss Drewery might have had a less depressing start to her one holiday in the year.

"Well, if *this* is doing what's right"—she said to herself, nibbling a biscuit and glancing at Susy's

downcast face: the paths of easy wrong-doing beckoned at that moment, as she thought of her usual jolly journey down to Suddaby, with luncheon in the third-class luncheon-car, where everybody could see her stylish costume.

But when they reached Suddaby, Susy herself felt neither joy nor sorrow in coming home, only an immense desire to lie down on her familiar bed upstairs, and to remain there for ever, and the old doctor had to be fetched at once.

"Is it something serious?" asked Miss Dimsdale and Miss Drewery, when he came down again in the sitting-room behind the shop.

He glanced at the two anxious maiden ladies.

"Birth and death are always serious," he said, "but Mrs. Branscombe will be all right if she keeps quiet. She must stay here until after the event—that's certain. Another railway journey would be impossible. Where is her husband?"

"He—he's got an appointment on a farm," stammered Miss Dimsdale.

"Something the same as he had at Mr. Hamilton's, I suppose," said the old doctor.

"Ye—es," Miss Dimsdale answered, telling her first calculated lie; and a thunderstorm coming up soon after, she had a queer sub-conscious feeling that the lie had brought it.

"But Mark belongs to us now," she explained to Cousin Ada afterwards. "I couldn't let that lot at Market Yarborough crow over him, could you?"

"*Me!*" said Miss Drewery, who had before now borne personal remarks about a want of strict

adherence to the truth. "Oh, I'm different. But you always maintained you couldn't tell a lie if you were suffering slow tortures."

"Um! Well, it's time you went out and fetched those eggs, if you're going to," said Miss Dimsdale shortly. "The pudding ought to be made by this."

So Susy remained mostly in her room until the end of Cousin Ada's visit. After that she began to come down for longer and longer periods, until at last she sat all day in the little room behind the shop, with the quick "tink, tink" of the bell in her ears and the hum of voices, often sinking to ask curiously she knew, about her and Mark.

"What a job for you, Miss Dimsdale," they would say; "you an unmarried lady and all. Well, I feel for you. But, of course, as Mr. Branscombe's got this good appointment he'll see you don't lose by having all the trouble here."

After a while the remarks began to vary, and customers would ask, with a preliminary cough, when she expected the husband over. It was of no use for Miss Dimsdale to reply that urgent business detained him—surely he could get over for the Sunday. Suddaby, to use its own vernacular, began to smell a rat.

Why didn't Mark Branscombe come? It was no business of theirs of course, but—

And they began to make it immensely their business as a natural result.

One day Jim Pyne came in with the news that Mr Hamilton had got back after a most unusually long absence; another day Jones came in, very loud and

dashing, to buy an ounce of tobacco, and ask if Mrs. Branscombe were staying there; and Mrs. Farrow toiled all along the river bank from the Wood Farm on a hot May afternoon with the green merino skirt in a basket on the top of a butter-milk cake.

"You always fancied my butter-milk cakes," she said, kissing Susy, "and I've often thought about you —every time I put on this green skirt. I wondered if you would just run me another flounce on. I've never liked it as it is, and never shall. There isn't enough set about it for a woman of my figure. And I have a yard and a half left over that you can use."

Thus Susy began to sew for the neighbours again, just as she did in that time which seemed now a hundred years ago. And when the first wrench of parting was over, and the maddening sense that she was powerless to go to Mark became less acute, she settled down to make the best of it as brave folk always do and always must. She realised that it was trying enough for Miss Dimsdale under any circumstances, and that the least she could do was to keep a cheerful countenance as a return. So of course Aunt Dimsdale came to the conclusion that she did not miss her husband much, and the neighbours wondered more than ever why Mark did not come. They naturally began now to supply reasons of their own.

After that single occasion on which Hamilton came into the little shop and learned that Mark and Susy had been married, he came no more; but towards the end of July, when Susy's face by the window, where she sat sewing, began to look pinched and

wistful even to somebody passing on the road, Jones drove up in his high, red-wheeled cart, and carried a small hamper up the steps into the shop.

"There," he said, banging it on the counter, "that's what her husband ought to provide for her, but if he can't or won't—I will. I can see plainly even from the road that what she wants is cham:. A glass every day with her dinner. There's six pint bottles there, and more where it came from."

"You're very kind," said Miss Dimsdale, her admiration for Jones greater than ever. "I'm sure I wish to goodness she'd had you."

"Oh, I've quite got over that," said Jones airily; "but if the fellow won't look after his wife, the neighbours must. More where that comes from, Miss Dimsdale. Good-day to you. Respects to Mrs. B."

And he departed, leaving his specific for all ills of mind and body with a mixed idea of helping Susy and triumphing over Mark—half good and half bad, like the motives of better men than Jones.

But unfortunately the door from the shop into the room was a chink open during the interview, and Susy heard every word and tone with a burning loyalty to her husband that seemed to choke her, made her long to cry out that he was doing honest labourer's work, and sending her every penny he could scrape together. But even Mark wished her to be silent because of those few men at Market Yarborough, who would be glad that the master they had turned adrift could get in nowhere else; there had been so much bitter, personal feeling stirred up over the matter.

"Aunt Dimsdale," said Susy, trembling from head to foot, "you must send the champagne back. Oh, you must send it back."

"Nonsense," said Miss Dimsdale. "We've behaved bad enough to Jones among us, without insulting him like that. You'll maybe need it some time, and be glad of it."

So saying she unpacked the six bottles, and stood them upon the shelf in the cupboard where she kept her ginger wine.

Several times during the next few days, Susy glanced at those bottles, and imagined a time when their contents might be given her while she was too weak to resist or care. The thought of that weighed on her like a cloud—she felt it would, in some queer way, belittle her husband if she were to drink Jones's champagne.

At last she had an idea. One Saturday Miss Dimsdale went by carrier to Market Yarborough in order to make some purchases for the shop, and a little girl from the village remained in charge. A little girl with an eye like a cod-fish, who would do the thing she was told to do without question.

"Ellen," said Susy, "will you cut the wires off these bottles with the tin-opener, and then pour the wine away?"

"Has it gone bad?" said Ellen. But receiving no reply, she went out and disposed of the champagne somehow in the back yard.

"It *must* have been bad," she said, on her return. "It was fit to blow you up—the first one was—I managed the others all right; but if they'd all six

gone off in the cupboard, there wouldn't ha' been much left of you and Miss Dimsdale. Talk about gunpowder—"

She ran away in answer to the bell, but before she reached the shop door a man brushed past her—it was Mark.

"Susy — Susy!" he cried, half sobbing. "I've managed to get a Sunday off at a moment's notice, and I came for a surprise. Oh, Susy, *aren't* you surprised and glad?" he continued, as she did not answer.

But indeed she was too surprised, and too glad, and before night a new little boy arrived in Suddaby —the son of Mark and Susan Branscombe.

When a lull came in the tempest of little happenings, and Susy lay calm upstairs with her baby beside her, Mark went out into the evening air and drew a long breath. He had never imagined anything so awful as this, and his shaken thoughts were all for his wife, he scarcely thought of his child; the little red atom of humanity whom Susy lay adoring had not aroused as yet any definite feeling in him whatever. He walked up and down the garden, terribly unhinged, poor lad, with his rough, toil-hardened hands still clenched, and his lip bleeding from where he had bitten it. He saw Miss Dimsdale coming out of the house, and walked across the little paddock to the pig-stye to escape her, but she followed him.

"Come in and have a cup of tea," she said kindly, "you'll feel different, Mark, when your wife's had half a dozen." Then her eye fell on the pigs. "Bless my soul!—look—what's the matter with them?" she cried, in a shrill voice.

"Oh, they're asleep," said Mark, giving them a prod; "they're all right."

But when they refused to respond to any amount of prodding and whacking, and only wheezed faintly on being turned over, Mark began to think, too, that there was something amiss.

"If this doesn't beat everything," wept Miss Dimsdale, who was also shaky and unnerved. "Just at a time when I've so much expense, to lose the pigs."

"Oh, Miss Dimsdale!" exclaimed Mark, "you can't think how I hate sponging on you like this—if I could only help it—I ought to have waited to marry until I was more certain of my prospects. I see that now."

"I never meant to hint that it was a burden in any way," said Miss Dimsdale hastily. "It isn't—I'm only too pleased to have her—and I can well afford it; only, of course, I don't want to lose my pigs. I spoke without meaning anything, you know."

"You don't often do that," said poor Mark. "Well, I'll just fetch Jim Pyne, he's as good as a vet. any day. I can't think what ails the pigs."

And even that expert Jim Pyne professed himself "flummuxed." They had no symptom of any known swine disease — and their mouths opened easily enough—he bent down to examine the tongues.

Then he straightened himself, and looked at Miss Dimsdale. "They've been drinking," he said.

"Well—of course—pigs does," said Miss Dimsdale, forgetting her grammar.

"Drinking wine, I mean," he replied solemnly, as if he accused Miss Dimsdale of drinking with them.

"Where have they got it from?" said Miss Dimsdale, staring at the five prostrate forms.

Mark looked from Jim Pyne's solemn face to Miss Dimsdale, and then at the pigs, and began to laugh helplessly.

"There's nothing to laugh at," began Miss Dimsdale, then a thought struck her, and she raced back to the house, glanced at the empty champagne bottles, and clutched the arm of Ellen, who was engaged in fetching coal.

"Did Mrs. Branscombe send you to throw away some champagne?" Miss Dimsdale hissed in her ear.

The startled Ellen dropped her coals.

"Ye-es," she gasped. "It had gone bad, though. All ready to blow the house up."

"And you put it into the pig-bucket?" continued Miss Dimsdale, speaking low for the sake of Susy above, but with concentrated fury.

"Ye-es," repeated Ellen, staring.

"Well, then, you've made my pigs drunk—*my* pigs—and me the soberest woman in the parish. They're so drunk they can't even grunt," whispered Miss Dimsdale.

At this pained revelation Ellen began to weep too, for there was an unsettled atmosphere about the little shop that evening which none could escape save Susy and her son; and Miss Dimsdale ran back down the garden to where Mark and Jim Pyne were still standing.

"It's Jones's champagne," she cried, "the six bottles he brought for Susy."

"Jones! Why did he bring it?" asked Mark

sharply. "He'd no business to bring it. You ought to have sent it back."

"Ought I?" said Miss Dimsdale, nettled. "Well, I don't see that. I couldn't afford to provide her with such things, nor you either, and I thought it was very kind of him, considering he once wanted to marry her himself; but he always was free-handed."

"He's a bit too free all ways for my taste," said Jim Pyne. "Go in and get your tea, Mr. Branscombe, you look to want it. Good-night, Miss Dimsdale, the pigs'll have naught no worse than a headache in the morning."

And Mark, like a fool, began to laugh again.

"One might think you were drunk too," said Miss Dimsdale, still ruffled, leading the way in to tea.

CHAPTER XIII

THERE is a time when emotional tempests burst open wide the House of Life, and the soul is too sick and weary to rise up and slam the door. The wolf cry, "What's the good," sounds very plainly then, and the old wolf himself noses, red-eyed, round the House. It's a time to thank God if our little lamp of faith burns bright enough to scare away the danger we have not strength enough to fight; a time to pray for those whose lamps are flickering.

And such a time came to Mark when he walked down the little lane in the darkness, leaving his wife and child asleep.

He was out of work again, the farmer having grown tired of a labourer who was finer spoken and better educated than the master, and Mark had intended to break the ill news gradually to Susy; but the surprise of his arrival so hastened the birth of his little son that Susy could be told nothing.

Miss Dimsdale had to be informed, of course, and though she made no reproaches, he felt himself regarded as a failure, dispassionately, without undue harshness. That judgment sank deep into him as it does into the heart of every man who has to bear it It's a man's birthright, somehow, to march forth with colours flying, and he feels disgraced by failure—

made less than he ought to be—even when it is through no fault of his own. And the bitter realisation comes most often through a woman. Deep down she feels that all men connected with her *ought* to be successes, and he reads in her eyes a pitying condemnation.

Mark carried in his hand a tin to fetch new milk, and Miss Dimsdale had sent him off with such a plain intimation that it was all he was good for, that she might just as well have spoken the words outright.

He trudged heavily, having gained a little of the farm labourer's walk, and the handle clinked against the side of the tin, which hit his leg as he went; a restless sheep bleated, a disturbed partridge whirred from the stubble of Hamilton's barley-field on the extreme edge of the property nearest Suddaby.

It was a dark night, quiet, without moon or stars, and Hamilton, too, had chanced to hear the wolf-cry in the faint sea-breezes which scarcely moved the tall grass round the stucco satyr. The cry is sounding so nearly, just round everybody's House of Life, that in any sudden lull of circumstance, or unguarded hour of depression, it can be very plainly heard, "What's the good? What's the good?" Haven't *you* heard it through the rumbling of distant wheels on the roadway on a sunny afternoon, or in the little hush that comes before the dawn?

Anyway Hamilton listened to it for a few minutes from his open window, and then went out along the same straight road from Saltmarsh to Suddaby upon which Mark was trudging. His step quickened as he

drew nearer to Suddaby; he felt almost afraid of that dark night of life coming on when he would be a dead mind in a living body. He wanted to reach the warm shelter of the "Dog and Duck," where he could inquire about some Irish labourers, and assure himself that he was still like other people. As he approached the village, he passed the carrier's cart, which goes every Saturday from Market Yarborough to Saltmarsh, a long journey for man and beast, ending very late. The only passenger sat near the carrier on the seat beneath the hood, and they did not observe Hamilton walking on the grass in the darkness.

"Rum job for Miss Dimsdale," the carrier chuckled. "I took her parcels in and made myself scarce. She was that fiery, somehow, she was fit to set you alight. Seems it's a boy."

"Ay, time flies—Susy Drewery's boy," assented a much older voice. "I mind her father and mother in that very farm we've just passed. It's ups and downs. That's why I ain't scared to die. You get settled. Won't be any ups and downs about that."

"Heard a chap preaching the other day we should go on working just the same. He was at the street corner in Market Yarborough," said the carrier.

"Well," observed the passenger, alighting at a cross-road, "I did think we should have a bit of rest there. I expect it's folks that haven't ever harrowed a field or mucked out a cow-stable here that's made that up. Seems as if everybody made out heaven to be what they wanted most, now-a-days."

"Gee-up," said the carrier, not interested in abstract questions, and anxious to get home to supper.

Then the cart rumbled off into the distance, and Hamilton was left alone again. The trees began to shadow the hedgerows now, and the gaunt dykes had disappeared; it was so dark on the footpath that he ran into a man with a milk tin coming from the village.

"Beg your pardon," said the man. "It's so pitch dark —"

"Branscombe!" cried Hamilton. "You here? I thought you had gone to some appointment in the South."

"I've got back," said Mark baldly, at a disadvantage, as he always felt on first seeing Hamilton, and yet, oddly enough, admiring the man all the more because of that. "I don't seem to keep my places long, do I?" and he tried to laugh.

"I was just thinking of you," said Hamilton. "I heard some men remarking that you had a son. My best congratulations, Branscombe."

"Thank you," replied Mark flatly. "Yes, it—he—arrived to-day." Then a note of acute feeling rang through. "Oh, it's been an awful day—you can't think—awful."

"Mrs. Branscombe's all right, I hope?" said Hamilton quickly.

"She's all right—*now*," groaned Mark.

"And you've got a son," said Hamilton again.

"Yes," said Mark, without enthusiasm, "the son's there right enough." Then he turned to another subject. "Well, did you enjoy your travels in Spain?"

"It was very pleasant," said Hamilton carelessly. "I'd been there before, you know."

A pause ensued, in which Hamilton wondered how he had ever found Branscombe pleasant and amusing. He was just the ordinary raw young fellow that his antecedents would lead one to expect—nothing out of the way there.

And Mark, after his rough work and mixing only with his inferiors in manner, felt the charm and dignity of the man before him to a degree which made him boyishly nervous.

"I was wondering," he said baldly, clearing his throat, "if you could hear of a berth for me anywhere. I didn't get a mastership after all, and I'm doing labourer's work now at seventeen shillings a week, while Susy lives with her own people. It's horrible. She'll come to me when she is well enough, but we can never pay Miss Dimsdale back—we shall just live from hand to mouth. Do you think you could help me to get something a bit better?"

Hamilton's eyes became cold and keen, though nobody could see them in the darkness. So this was what came of helping a fellow once—you no sooner spoke to him again than he began to beg for more assistance.

"I shall be in Market Yarborough on Wednesday," he said, "and I'll try what I can do in the meantime. You might meet me at the White Horse Inn at three o'clock. But I'm afraid I cannot hold out much hope. Good-night."

"Good-night," said Mark, and they plodded on their separate ways.

On the day appointed, at a few minutes before three, Hamilton was ready in a private room at the White Horse at Market Yarborough. He stood by the window staring out at the crowd outside, which was smaller than usual because it was the middle of harvest. Women walked across the roads, picking up their skirts, men in felt hats stood together, children ran between the carts, and a blind beggar went past, led by a sharp boy just like himself, but for the blindness.

In a flash the thought came to Hamilton that he was really less than that blind beggar. He had to go out of the world, leaving no more trace than that fly on the window pane, but the blood of that blind beggar might flow in a hundred generations of Englishmen.

The fact was that Hamilton had so very much, that the one thing he could, or would not have, became a sort of obsession—a Naboth's vineyard. And beyond that he had the strong desire for a son, which may have come from some Jewish ancestor, who inherits from long centuries the hope of being father to a Great Prophet. His desire was far stronger than the ordinary unmarried Englishman could understand, and he had the Oriental feeling that a man who leaves no son behind him is only half a man—subtly disgraced—left out.

There was an unconscious arrogance about Hamilton's thought of himself which made the thing seem incredible.

For *him* to be so tainted that he dared not have a son—for him to be left out!

Then Mark was shown in—the man he had been kind to as an older, much wiser patron may be to a young fellow down on his luck—and yet the man who was the father of Susy's son.

After the first greetings and inquiries were over Hamilton sat down and motioned Mark to a seat.

"I'm sorry to have no good news for you," he said gravely. "Very sorry. I am negotiating for the sale of Saltmarsh, and I hoped to make some arrangement with the buyer on your behalf. I thought he might be glad to have you as agent or foreman, but it appears out of the question."

"You're selling Saltmarsh!" exclaimed Mark, losing sight of his own misfortunes in his surprise. "Why, the Hamilton's seem as much a part of Saltmarsh as the sea is. What's making you part with the property?"

Hamilton got up and walked to the window again, whence he could see the blind beggar now stationary at a corner with his son beside him.

"I have various reasons for wanting to be rid of the place," he said; "but the chief is because I am leaving England for good. Once gone, I shall never come back again, and I don't want to be hampered with any property here."

"Leaving England," said Mark stupidly. "Why —you're — you're so fond of England and the country. You always talk about an English summer being fresh and cool, like spring in other places."

Hamilton turned sharply round.

"Well, I'm going," he said. "There's not much use in stopping until I—I'm what my father was."

"But what difference?" hesitated Mark, not knowing how to put it.

"What difference will leaving England make? Just this—I'm giving myself a chance instead of sitting down and expecting. I went to see a very clever doctor when I was away, and he told me to get rid of all past associations. To start afresh in entirely new surroundings. He has a theory that any tendency can be counteracted by new associations and hard, congenial, manual labour, and he recommended my taking up a plot of ground in Canada. I'm big and strong, you see, and I must use *all* my strength; there's my only chance of salvation from a mad old age."

"It's a desperate remedy," said Mark.

"Isn't it a desperate disease?" asked Hamilton. "Here am I, waiting, expecting every month to feel my powers fail. Can anything be worse than that?"

"I don't know," answered Mark soberly. "You have never known what it was to lose one job after another—to be looked down upon by everybody as a failure. You've had a lot, let the end come as it may."

"Would you change places with me?" said Hamilton softly.

There was a pause.

"Ah, you see," he continued. "You're poor, out of a job, looked on as a failure, and yet you wouldn't change places with Hamilton of Saltmarsh, the author of 'Adam Hilarius,' the rich man who's got everything but what he wants."

Mark felt a sudden rush of intense pity.

"But you wouldn't change with me either—things are evened in life," he said.

"Wouldn't I?" asked Hamilton. "Why, Branscombe, if I only could! A fair start, a—a son."

He paused, choked by his fierce anger that this young man, who seemed only to look on a child as the inconvenient result of marriage, should be given a son, whilst he—

"Good God! aren't you *glad* you have a boy?" he cried.

Mark flushed crimson in his anxiety to comfort without knowing how.

"Oh, you needn't think it's so grand to have a son," he said eagerly. "It really isn't. There's nothing in it at all. Only a bit of a kid that has an ugly red face, and cries."

He looked so incurably boyish, leaning forward to deliver his disconnected scraps of comfort, that Hamilton might have been touched but for the storm of rage that shook his being to its foundation. He saw red, but like a spoilt child, who has always been indulged, rather than a balanced man of the world. He was capable of considering nothing in earth or heaven but his thwarted desire.

"You wouldn't change with me," he said, very low; "but I'd give all I have in the world for what you make so light of—for your son."

Then, as he stood looking at Mark under his eyebrows, the oddest changes came over his face. It grew dark, then illuminated, and his pale, fine skin flushed purple-red for the first time in Mark's recollection.

"Branscombe," he said, his voice sinking until it was only a half-whisper, "I want what you have—you want what I have. Let's change." He paused a moment to draw breath. "I'm getting a bad price for Saltmarsh. I'll not sell it at all. It shall be yours until your son is twenty-five, and then he shall inherit all I have."

Mark crossed the little room before he answered.

"Mr. Hamilton," he said, "if this is a joke, it's a damned bad one."

"It's the most serious speech I ever made in all my life," said Hamilton.

"But what do you want me to do?" asked Mark. "You must want some return."

"I want you to give me your son," said Hamilton, very distinctly. "You'll have plenty more, and I don't know what to do with my money. Why shouldn't I buy a son like anything else? The only conditions are that he must be my adopted son, and bear my name, and be educated as I desire. Then, when I grow old, if I do follow my father's footsteps after all, he must be ready to come and look after me. That's all the return I want."

"But you could get an adopted child cheaper than that," argued Mark, trying to see daylight. "If you want to adopt a boy—well, the world's full of children."

"Not of yours and your wife's," said Hamilton. "I could trust you to bring him up in obedience to my wishes, and you would make him ready to come to me in my foolish old age if I needed him. You're honest. You wouldn't take all I could give and deny me my payment."

"But there's Susy to consult," answered Mark doubtfully.

He did not refer to his own affection for the child, because he was honest to the core, and he felt none as yet—the tiny scrap of humanity was scarcely real to him. Still he had a feeling that a man ought not to give up all rights in his first-born son.

His hesitation drove Hamilton into further persistence; opposition hardened a sudden whim into a desire which must at every cost be satisfied. He felt his own will increase and strengthen, until he knew he could dominate the man before him, unless there were some stronger influence in the background; and as he stood there, waiting, he looked as princes ought to look when they wait upon vital issues. If only the event had been more worthy of such waiting, the end more noble than the satisfaction of a rich man's whim!

"Think what it will mean," urged Hamilton, as Mark did not continue. "Surely it's very little to give in return for a sure position in a place you know best, and an utter absence of anxiety. You need never be out of work any more, Branscombe."

The very words went home to Mark with a sense of infinite relief. Nobody who has always had work, and security for those they love, can know how the mere hearing of the words seemed to Mark like the sudden ceasing of the engines after a troublous voyage; no more ceaseless jarring and grinding, but a lull on sunlit waters in a pleasant harbour.

"If Susy consents, I do," he said, drawing a long

breath. "But I can't answer for her. She's the boy's mother."

"Make her see it as you do," said Hamilton. "You can if you try, and a good woman has no worldly wisdom of her own. Point out to her what will happen if you refuse: a constant, sordid struggle with poverty, and every drawback that can follow the family of a man whose commercial value has been ruined; a dreary searching for underpaid posts, and at the very best obtaining one on sufferance—both of you growing old and hard in the fight for a bare living. And your child—your son who might, through a mere change of name, inherit all you could never give—what of him? Won't he deteriorate with you, and perhaps curse you one day for what you withheld from him? Even if you fall back on Miss Dimsdale—"

"No power on earth shall make me do that," interrupted Mark.

"You may have no alternative," pursued Hamilton. "If you fall back on her, after all, and get work on some farm near Suddaby; what then? Her stinging words about your ears when you come home at night, and the farmer's solid dissatisfaction with you as a ne'er-do-well throughout the day. Do you wish to be that most pitiable of all men—a ne'er-do-well come home to roost?"

"Stop!" cried Mark. "You've said enough—too much. You're going the way now to make me refuse. If I can let you adopt our child, I will—only I must ask my wife's consent."

"And if she refuses?"

"I refuse," said Mark.

"Then there'll be a month for you to prepare your arguments in," said Hamilton. "Don't ask Mrs. Branscombe's consent until she is out again. Promise me that, Branscombe? Promise me that she shall guess nothing of it until then?"

"Certainly, if you really wish it," said Mark. "I suppose you think it might upset her."

"I'm sure it would," answered Hamilton. "Well, my horse has come round, I see. I must be going."

"I feel I haven't been half grateful enough. It's a tremendous thing," said Mark. "I can't understand how you think it worth while."

And by the time Hamilton got back to Saltmarsh he could not understand either. The desire to adopt another man's three days old son was surely not strong enough to make him upset all his previous arrangements; he was like Mark, he could not understand why it was worth while.

But it certainly was, all the same.

Then a sudden picture of Susy, as he first saw her over the sweet-briar hedge in the dusk, came vividly before him.

But still he didn't understand. He was worldly-wise, and very clever, but he fancied it was only because he wanted someone to come after him called George Hamilton: for the wisest man is a dear fool in love.

CHAPTER XIV

IN the days that followed, Mark lent a hand with the harvesting at Farrow's farm, and the sun and wind and pleasant autumn weather seemed a right accompaniment to what went on within him. Every morning when he woke up he grew more used to the splendid feeling that something good had happened; then came the gradual piecing of the golden future before him and Susy, and he jumped up—quietly, lest he should wake baby in that little house—but wanting to laugh and sing, and, above all, to tell Susy.

It is so easy—if you are like Mark—to believe what you want to believe, that he found no difficulty in persuading himself that Susy would be as delighted as he was. Miss Dimsdale was naturally annoyed that anybody could be so gloriously joyous who wasn't paying his own expenses. But Susy was so heartened by his cheerfulness, that she grew strong with wonderful rapidity, and the boy became a perfect Goliath of a baby, fit, as his mother said, "for Barnum's show," and Miss Dimsdale had to pinch herself until she was black in places to prevent intemperate remarks coming forth of themselves. People had no business to be as happy as that without a fixed income.

One evening towards the middle of September,

Mark came home all tired and brown and smelling of harvest wind and sun, and he sat by Susy in the room where he had once climbed to place the silk gown on her window-sill. The window stood open, and they talked in whispers because of the sleeping child: and always afterwards when anyone said, "happiness," their thoughts went back to that hour. Not that they said anything at all that mattered, only the smell of the sweet-briar in the dusk outside, and the hushed order of the little place where they sat hand in hand seemed in every way perfect.

Then Miss Dimsdale came upstairs carrying a basin of gruel for Susy's supper, and she saw the glow on their faces with a bitterness that was natural, considering that she had to cook and clean in the intervals of serving out ha'po'ths of peppermints and ounces of tea. They'd no business to look so radiant as that—nobody had, under a certain five hundred a year.

"Supper's ready," was all she permitted herself, by a superhuman suppression, to say.

And Mark went down out of the glory to the little parlour behind the shop, making up his mind to give Miss Dimsdale the most beautiful brooch to be had in Market Yarborough, to take the place of the old cairngorm pebble she was wearing, as soon as he had money enough to pay for it.

He was always wanting to give somebody something perfectly useless and dearer than he could afford, and he pictured most gleefully a bar of blue torquoises beneath Aunt Dimsdale's sharp-cut chin.

A few days after that came Sunday morning, still

and exquisitely fresh, with a blue haze in the distance where the trees were deep, dull green, just ready to turn colour with the first frost. Every hedge was shining with cobwebs that the dew made visible, and mushrooms glistened round and fresh in every pasture bottom. It was just such a glorious day when Susy had met Mark coming out of church, and Hamilton's face peered at them so oddly through the yew-hedge. She thought of that morning, and of their walk by the river bank later in the day, when she opened her window to look across the little dewy garden; but dimly, as a sound comes from the shore to somebody at sea.

For Susy's little ship was sailing gently before the pleasant breeze which wafts those back to the shore of the world again, who have been very ill. She felt nearly well, able almost to face the world but not required to do it. And Mark and baby were with her: baby whom she worshipped with that tenderness which gilds the beginning of life so beautifully for little children, that years pass before the grey begins to show through at all. She was certain that Mark would find work somewhere, because he made so few demands, and they needed so little to be happy on. Just daily bread and shelter and each other.

Then baby woke up with a cry, and Miss Dimsdale came across the landing, and Susy's little ship drew in very near to the shore of the world with her aunt's remark:

"Fine day for your first outing."

"Oh, I'll wait and go to-morrow," replied Susy.

"Everybody'll have something to say about Mark coming down to farm labourer's work, or they'll think it, and I shall see."

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Miss Dimsdale, who was indeed, as she said, "fairly moiled out," and irritable in consequence. "If you're going to take notice of what folks think you may as well drown yourself at once. There's no woman in Suddaby that doesn't walk out for the first time after her confinement on a Sunday afternoon, hold of her husband's arm. Haven't you done enough queer things without doing any more to make talk about?"

"If you feel like that about it, aunt—" said Susy gently, her little boat bumping upon the shore of the world.

So, after the heat of the early afternoon died down, Susy put on her out-of-door things. It had grown cool and pleasant, tender blue shadows crept up among the trees, the last breath of the west wind died away: even the grasses by the roadside did not tremble any longer, and Susy went out with Mark into a tranquil Sunday world. She felt like stepping upon the shore of the world for the first time—only with knowledge.

As they went down the village street everybody looked out from doors and gates and windows clad in best clothes and a perfectly visible atmosphere of Sunday leisure. Everybody was interested, with a warm concern that more than makes up for the accompanying stings of gossip: it is so much more heartening to have stings one day and greetings the next, than a level, blank indifference.

At last they reached the river bank, and Susy rested on the bridge, looking up-stream at the blue-grey water with the willows bending over it, and smelt the sweet scent of the wild mint, and noticed how the far distance towards Saltmarsh way was beginning to grow dim with night coming on. The sunshine gleamed strongly still through the church trees near at hand. It was one of those moments which show what life can be, but even as Susy grasped it, it grew dim.

A group of figures grew plainer in the hushed distance along the river bank; then the voices travelled, and at last it was Mrs. Farrow and her family on their way to evening service.

"Well," said Mrs. Farrow, very red and hot, "this is the first bit of luck I've had to-day. First, the soot came down the chimney and spoiled the sauce—then when we came to harness the pony he'd gone lame—but I'd set my mind on calling in to see you before church, Mrs. Branscombe, and I'm not one to be beaten by a lame pony."

"So we've come on Shanks's pony, he! he!" said Mr. Farrow, a good man suffering from an incurable desire to be funny. "Shanks's pony, he! he! he!" he repeated, giving his labourer a dig in the ribs to show that though he paid Mark by the week-day he was not above treating him as an equal on Sunday.

And Mark, who somehow knew this without thinking of it, laughed until the trout swam away affrighted to show his appreciation. There was a generosity about Mark that warmed at once to a thing like that, where a meaner nature would be offended. A person

had only to mean well for him to mean tremendously well too.

"When is the christening to be?" asked Mrs. Farrow, as they walked along together. "Have you decided what you're going to call the baby?"

"Oh, we always made up our minds baby should be Mark Henry, after my husband and his father, if it were a boy," replied Susy placidly.

"And who are the god-parents?" pursued Mrs. Farrow, with an air of polite condescension. "Your aunt, I take it, for one?"

"Yes," answered Susy. "And we're thinking of Mark himself, and—why, we haven't thought about the other, have we, Mark?"

"P'raps Mr. Hamilton?" insinuated Mr. Farrow. "There's a rule I've always laid down in choosing god-parents for my children, and that's '*go for the mug*.' They'll not do much later on, so go for them that will give the biggest mug while the iron's hot, as the saying is. My godfather never spoke to me in my life; he lives in Australia now, if he does live; but there's a mug on my sideboard that hasn't its cousin nearer than Market Yarborough."

"Well, I think you want to look to a man's character," said Mrs. Farrow, "and Mr. Hamilton may be good for a mug of beaten gold, but he'd sort of cast a blight—"

"He's a friend of mine," broke in Mark, glancing uneasily from one face to another. "I shall certainly ask him to be godfather if he will consent to stand. People about here are so narrow-minded—"

"Maybe you'd like to christen the boy after him.

He! he! Another George Hamilton!" giggled Mr. Farrow.

"Well, and what if I did?" cried Mark, flushing crimson as was his habit when moved at all. "What if I did choose to christen him George Hamilton? It's a free country—nobody can prevent me."

"Come, come, Mark," smiled Susy. "You take it as seriously as if there were some chance of such a thing happening. Why, we never see anything of Mr. Hamilton now, and have not done for months," she added, turning to Mr. Farrow. "He was kind to Mark once at a pinch, but we should never depend on him for any future help. He's just one of the sort who'll do a kindness while the fancy lasts, and then drop all thought of it clean out of his mind—and all thought of the person he has benefited too. I daresay he's forgotten there is a Mark and Susy Branscombe."

"Then it's not true," cried Mrs. Farrow. "I said it wasn't."

"What wasn't?" said Susy, looking puzzled from Mr. and Mrs. Farrow to her husband's startled, conscious face. "What had you heard, Mrs. Farrow?"

"Why, that your husband was going to be agent with Mr. Hamilton, and that you were all to live at Saltmarsh House," answered Mrs. Farrow. "But it did seem a queer plan; I'm glad there's nothing—"

"Who the dickens told you that?" interrupted Mark.

Mr. Farrow was enjoying himself; he had gained the whole attention of the company as he answered

for his wife, and he rattled the coins at the bottom of his pockets with a jaunty air.

"Well, it was this way," he said: "me and a few others were standing on the railway platform at Market Yarborough—some jolly fellows amongst us, I can tell you—when up comes Mr. Hamilton to buy a paper at the book-stall. I went after for my ha'po'th. 'See that chap,' said the book-stall boy. 'Well, he wrote this book here, Adam something or other. Doesn't look to be much comic about him, does there? And yet this is a funnier shilling's worth than we've had for many a day."

"Oh, we have the book. Did you buy it?" interrupted Susy.

"No," said Mr. Farrow bluntly. "When I've a shilling to spare, I don't ware it in books, I ware it in beer. Well, as I was saying, we began to pass remarks about Mr. Hamilton, and a little chap from Saltmarsh way asked if we'd heard you were going there. Seems he walks out with the housekeeper's daughter. Not a man i' my class of life, quite, you know, but at the market—"

"When you've wared your shilling in beer," added Mrs. Farrow unpleasantly, "all I can say is that you'd better keep the silly tales to yourself that you hear among that common, boozing lot. You see there isn't a word of truth in it."

"On'y wish there was," said the farmer heartily, as he shook hands at the church corner. "Your husband'll make more out of threshing corn than thrashing boys, Mrs. Branscombe. He, he!" Then a sudden recollection of Mark's cause for leaving

the Grammar School overwhelmed Mr. Farrow, and he turned a lively purple. "That is—I meant no offence—cut out for a farmer—first-rate;" and he murmured himself confusedly up the churchyard path, mopping his brow.

"Dang me if I'll ever make a joke again," he concluded, as he subsided upon a seat in the porch. "Talk's full of pitfalls for a man that's uncommon witty. Better be like old Barnstaple that went to the pantomime and cried at the comic songs."

Mrs. Farrow loomed up in the porch entrance, and sank resignedly upon the opposite seat.

"You've done it again," she remarked.

"Folks are so thick-headed, they don't understand my jokes," said Mr. Farrow testily.

"Have you been making any to Jones lately?" asked Mrs. Farrow, with meaning.

But that subject was so fraught with painful recollections that Mr. Farrow retreated inside the church where Mrs. Farrow would not have the irreverence to refer more particularly to the last occasion upon which he had rallied Jones upon his admiration for Susy.

"Is my bonnet all right?" whispered Mrs. Farrow, as the congregation began to arrive.

"Feather coming off—hanging over your left ear," whispered back Mr. Farrow, now restored.

A hasty hand went up to the bonnet, but the three little pink feathers stood erect as ever in a line with Mrs. Farrow's nose.

"You'll be *murdered* for it some day," she hissed, as

the voluntary struck up, "and then perhaps you'll drop it."

"There's Miss Dimsdale, first time she's been for weeks," murmured Mr. Farrow, in a conciliatory undertone.

Then the parson began, "When the wicked man," and the far sound of singing came through open windows from the Wesleyan Chapel, and all the lovers went away down narrow lanes or along the river bank, so that Suddaby street was deserted, and the little shop door that clattered and tinkled all the week was as blank and quiet as the door of a hermitage. Baby lay sleeping in the room above, and the Branscombes sat below by the window opening upon the garden. No fairy prince and princess in their silver castle were ever set more delicately remote from the bustle and hum of everyday than Susy and Mark were, ringed in by the dim hush of that Sunday night. But magic once gone can never come back again, though joy often does; so it was reality that they sat facing as they looked at each other across Aunt Dimsdale's little table, Mark casting about in his mind for the best way of telling his wife what he had promised to Hamilton.

"Look here, Susy," he said at last. "You'll have thought it funny I was so cheerful when I was in such low water—depending on your aunt—and only earning odd half-crowns with Farrow?"

"No," answered she slowly, thinking back. "No. I didn't. I was just so happy with baby and you that I didn't think—I only ought to have done

What—" she paused and caught her breath—"what made you so cheerful? What is there you haven't told me? Oh, I know, I know! It was true all the time, Mr. Hamilton has taken you to be his agent."

Then, being still rather weak, she laid her face in her hands and sobbed with pure excess of thankfulness.

He came round and kneeled by her with his arm round her shoulder.

"Dear," he said, "wait until you've heard all about it. There are conditions, not difficult ones, but still there they are. He—Mr. Hamilton—wants baby to be named after him, George Hamilton."

Susy uncovered her face, and the tears ceased in her great surprise.

"So that was true, too," she said. "Surely Mr. and Mrs. Farrow couldn't know that before I did?"

"No, no," cried Mark, "that was pure accident; and I'm sure I don't know how it leaked out that I was going to be agent at Saltmarsh. I thought no living soul knew but Hamilton and myself. But, Susy, it's more than the agency he offers us—it's Saltmarsh for our very own—at least—in trust for baby."

He stammered and flushed, it was so unexpectedly difficult to explain.

"I can't understand," said Susy, going very white. "He's giving us Saltmarsh, and wants nothing back but to have baby called after him. It's impossible!"

"There now," said Mark, "you see why I waited to tell you until you were stronger. It's too much for you even now."

"Happiness never hurts," said Susy, with a trembling laugh. "Oh, Mark, how he must have liked you when you were with him that time." And she kissed her husband, seeing nothing very wonderful in Hamilton's liking him even to that extent.

But when she lifted her face and looked at him again, she said quickly: "There's something more."

Mark got up and walked to the empty fireplace and back again. It had looked so easy during the past happy weeks, and now it loomed up so unexpectly difficult that he had just to make a dash for it, or lose his courage altogether.

"Fact is," he blurted out, "Hamilton wants to adopt the boy, and I've given my permission subject to your consent. We're to have charge of him until he's grown up, but Hamilton's to direct his education, and we're to bring him up ready to go to Hamilton when he's wanted. That's in the bond. He trusts us to do that."

"But why? Why does he want to do it?" asked Susy, very quietly.

"Oh, he's got a perfect mania for having a son—someone to bear his name and come after him—I really can't understand it."

"No," said Susy, getting up stiffly by the aid of the table. "No. I don't think you would. Then it's all settled. You're ready to—to give up your boy subject to my consent?"

"It's not giving up," said Mark, a sense of discomfort making him irritable. "Don't be unreasonable, dear. Can't you see that we shall have

our boy as long as people ever do keep their lads at home? There's really nothing in it, but that he'll be called Hamilton instead of Branscombe."

And his thoughts flew aloft to the little bundle of humanity that did not represent anything sufficiently definite to him to matter in the slightest whether it were called by one surname or another. The instinct of paternity is less often roused by very young children than the sentimentalists suppose; but no one could expect Susy to remember this, of course, as she stood there up in arms for her first-born son. She was tired and overstrung or perhaps she might have taken the matter differently; but as it was she felt outraged.

"You never wanted a child," she said. "You weren't glad when I first told you. You're glad to be rid of him."

Then she fled away to kneel by her baby's cradle, sobbing under her breath in a perfect frenzy of mother-love:

"Oh, mother wants him—mother wants him."

"Dearest," entreated Mark, kneeling beside her, "don't take it like this. Of course the whole thing shall be given up if you don't wish it. But think what it means to us all. Comfort for you, a new chance in life for me, never to be out of work again."

Susy got up, pushed her hair back from her aching brow, and looked from her child to her husband. Gradually she began to see reason, and her first wild instinct of revolt died away. The only sane and reasonable thing to do was to allow Mark to give

up his son. After all, she need give nothing up. He would never have an adopted mother to take her place.

At the very thought of it she felt the access of rage coming over her again.

But if Mark did not care.

Ah, that was where the sting lay. If Mark had seemed to care she would have seen everything differently.

But she had given him a son, and he did not care.

"You're right, Mark," she said at last. "It would be sheer folly to refuse. There are a thousand advantages—"

"Yes," cried Mark eagerly, "think what we can do for others if they come. They won't have to go down-hill with us but up—"

"Hush," said Susy. "We'll hope the rest may stop where the children come from, they're wanted there, Mark."

"Susy," said Mark, "don't talk like that. It's not too late now to give the whole thing up. I can't bear it if you go on like this." And being rather a boy himself the tears came into his eyes, and he choked miserably.

At that all Susy's anger went away, and she turned comforter, soothing him with caresses and tender words until he thought she looked upon the whole matter just as he did, and that it was just one of her spurts of temper which always flared out and passed away in smoke.

He could not see how that odd pride of hers was stirred into a smouldering heat that might burn for her life-time.

Just as she was lying down in bed a new thought zigzagged almost visibly through her brain: she could feel the flash of it.

Hamilton cared. Hamilton wanted her son so much that he was prepared to give his little kingdom in exchange.

She put her little baby whom Mark had dethroned upon the place of honour Hamilton had made, and thought more kindly of the maker.

CHAPTER XV

HAMILTON himself was far less concerned with the Branscombes' future than they would have deemed possible, considering what he was doing for it. But he had in some measure the casual mind of all outcasts, standing, as he felt himself to stand, outside of the common lot; and it is such an infinitely pitiable thing to be different to other people. It is splendid of course to be more, and rather dreary to be less, but it is awful to be *different.*

He was watching the men load the last waggon of the harvest, and the red moon rose over the bare stubble fields. These men were going back after their labours to homes with wives and children who belonged to them, whom they would not have to thank or pay in their old age for care and protection. They would only be receiving a just and natural return.

His scheme of adopting a son to protect that foolish old age of his own that grinned always horribly before him, seemed now as futile as plans thought of in a feverish night do in the fresh light of morning. But, anyway, that made no difference; he was leaving Saltmarsh. Better for someone to have it who would look after the place and carry on the name than for it to be sold at a ridiculous price to a

stranger: better—but this thought lay too deep hidden to find words—better for Susy's son to follow him than any other.

What spoilt the prospect before him always was that dread which had begun when he was a little lad and first heard how his grandfather and great-grandmother died; which crystallised into a definite horror on that dull, quiet autumn day when a male keeper had to be procured for his father.

If he had been a coward, he would have taken the short way out of it all long ago; but he had a courage so great as to be quite unconscious. He never even glanced at the possibility of running down the bye-ways of death: he would wait royally, though what agony there might be, for the high road to be opened.

When the last waggon had rumbled away, with the moonlight on the shouting children, and on the labourers tramping behind, he stood alone in a perfect silence, looking over the fresh-cut stubble which lay before him like a silver plain, grey enough in the day-time, but now most lovely.

And he was comforted.

That is the compensation for so much to those who really love the land, and do not just pretend to because it's fashionable. They can never be quite comfortless while the world's so wonderfully fair.

But when he got back into the long room facing the sea, this mood wore off because there was nothing at the back of it, and the whole quiet place seemed alive with suggestion. The lamp-light shone tawdry in the rays of the moon which came through the open window. All the dead passions and slow-

waning hopes and sordid despairs that had been felt within those walls crept round him once again. The reckless laughter and bitter silence of past men and women were his, too, as he sat in the ugly Georgian chair at the head of his empty table. The place hummed with suggestions of pain and evil, and no stubble silvered with a harvest moon was there to turn the mind unconsciously to the saving thought that the Creator *must* be good.

Hamilton pushed his chair back, and rose.

"The doctor was right," he said. "I shall have to clear out of this place. Everything here reminds me that my time for gibbering unreason must come too. But if I'm far away from all past associations, dependent on my own work for all I eat that isn't tinned, I may forget—anyway, it's a chance, and I'll take it. After all, thousands of suffering men and women are clutching at worse straws than that every day."

He broke off, startled to find that he was talking to the portrait, upon which a patch of moonlight fell, as if it were a living auditor.

Then he drew down the blinds, and reached out for a copy of "Omar Khayyam" which lay near on the mantel-piece. If he had to hear the wolf cry that night, he would listen to it turned into exquisite melody, echoed from the desert through the centuries, making the futility of life more real to those who despaired a little already, killing hope where it was nearly dead, whispering a poisoned sweet accompaniment to every faltering doubt, until each seemed a perfect melody.

When he had finished reading, he walked up and down the room several times, and then sat down to the writing-table.

"Dear Branscombe," he wrote, "I find that I am, after all, unable to be here as I should have wished, to welcome Mrs. Branscombe and yourself. I had arranged to start upon my usual autumn trip next week, but am now leaving to-morrow morning quite unexpectedly. However, you know exactly what to do, and Mrs. Branscombe will find the house all right, I hope, quite ready for her and young George. I was delighted to find, when I called upon her, that she was pleased with the idea, she was so gracious to me that I could see plainly she had no objection to the change of name. I needn't say, my dear chap, that I hope you three will bring the happiness to Saltmarsh with you that there ought to be in the old house if the balance is to be made anything like fair and even. I shall be here for a few weeks before leaving England if Mrs. Branscombe can do with me. In the meantime, all good wishes." Then, after the signature, came the postscript. "By the way, I found an old sea-chest in the loft when I was having things made ready for my departure. It contains a bale of brown silk left by smugglers at some time or other, they often dropped their goods here in the old days, and my grandfather winked at the custom. I should be so delighted if Mrs. Branscombe could make any use of it. I have had it placed in the wardrobe in her room. Tell her to give it away if she thinks it too ugly to wear."

Mark received this on the day before they went to

Saltmarsh, and so the little party drove up in Mr. Farrow's cart with their worldly goods piled about like, as Mr. Farrow said, with one of his happy strokes of wit, a party of field-rats going to live in a horse-stable.

"See," he said, as his remark met with no response. "Rats—you were as poor as rats, you know—and stable—where you'll get fed up, eh! See now! Good enough for a pantomime that, eh?"

"I see hard enough," said Mark, remembering with difficulty Mr. Farrow's true kindness of heart, and how he had come forward with an offer of work in those darkest days, and how this very cart had been lent with a free cordiality that admitted of no refusal.

All the same the conversation languished as the square house came in sight, and Mark and Susy looked at it in a whirl of different emotions; but the strongest of all was the same in both of them: this was going to be their home. For a moment the constraint which that odd pride of Susy's had made between them vanished, and they looked down the drive with but one thought between them—this was home at last.

They both felt that sudden lull of the strained nerves which follows when the noisy engines, that have dinned and jarred all through a troublous voyage, cease, and there is only the peaceful lap of the waters against the ship side. Just for the minute, while they drove from the gate to the house door, that sudden ceasing of the strain, that lull of restful security, filled every thought. They could go into

their own home and shut the door against the world at last.

But when the door opened, and the housekeeper with her daughter stood on the threshold, a thousand other considerations came into view with them, and the old constraint descended like a cloud between husband and wife.

"I won't come in," said Mr. Farrow. "You'll want to just look round by yourselves first."

But in spite of his words he peered into the hall with such devouring curiosity that Susy felt obliged to ask him inside.

"How de do, Mrs. Bateson," he said, shaking hands with the housekeeper. "Well, Miss Bateson, got a sweetheart yet? Time you did, you know. Make hay while the sun shines."

Lizzie Bateson, who was about thirty, and not prepossessing, tossed her head. She meant to marry Hamilton, as a previous maid had married his father, when the right time came, in the interval she conducted herself with irreproachable decorum, and tried on old Mrs. Hamilton's wardrobe behind locked doors when that time seemed long in coming. It is strange to think what plans may lie in brains seemingly blank—plans intimately affecting ourselves—and we no more dream of it than we should of the chairs and tables plotting to involve us.

There was nothing about Mark or Susy or the whole situation, in fact, which was not as plain as print to Mrs. Bateson; and Mr. Farrow's genial greeting just placed her on that equality with her new mistress which she considered fitting.

"Come in, do," she said, "and I'll take you straight to your room, Mrs. Branscombe. You'll be glad to put baby down. My word, this is a fine thing for you and your husband."

She determined from the first to have no nonsense, and Mrs. Branscombe might as well understand that at once. She had taken a little more beer than usual at supper to support her in this determination.

"Thank you," said Susy, sitting down in the bedroom, with a sigh of relief that the ordeal of arrival was safely over.

Mrs. Bateson sat down too, rather more militant and offensive than she would have been without that extra beer.

"When Mr. Hamilton first told me you were coming I made up my mind to go," she remarked, crossing her legs, and leaning back. "But I thought it over and decided to stop and help you. It seemed only Christian. What could you know of the upkeep of a house like this. So I refused a splendid offer of a place from a nobleman in Essex. I wasn't going to let Mr. Hamilton down after all these years, and have people saying how different everything was now. You'll understand that, I'm sure, Mrs. Branscombe, though I'm worked to death at times, and it's not a high-paid place."

Susy was no fool, and thought she did understand as she glanced at Mrs. Bateson's prosperous appearance. But she only answered:

"Of course you've been a long time with Mr. Hamilton."

"Well, I must be off now," said Mrs. Bateson, rising.

"By the way," with her hand on the door, "I suppose I'd better order things in, and see to the general housekeeping as before. Mr. Hamilton said I was to ask you, but of course he'd expect things to go on the same, and you won't understand the ways of the house."

Her elaborate carelessness was not convincing, and Susy was too shrewd to let such an opportunity go by. North-country women may be soft on some points, but they are as hard as nails on those connected with the management of a house. The old-fashioned virtue of good housekeeping grows as strongly there as the spear-grass on the shore, or the heather on the wolds. A natural product of the soil.

"Oh," replied Susy, with equal carelessness, "I'm sure you'll be glad of a rest, Mrs. Bateson; you've been working hard for all these years, and it's time somebody else took a turn. Besides, I shall never dare to look Mr. Hamilton in the face if I've sat here idle all the winter and done nothing—a strong young woman like me. I'll certainly take the accounts, and ordering stores, and so on, off your hands. Please let me have the books to-morrow morning."

"Who's going to pay 'em?" demanded Mrs. Bateson, very red indeed. "You and Mr. Branscombe, I suppose. He! he!"

"Certainly," said Susy, thinking with relief of the cheque which Hamilton had paid into Mark's account for current expenses.

Mrs. Bateson came back into the room again. She was beside herself with rage at the thought that her

days of endless peculation and cheating were over, and at the downfall of those dreams which she shared with her daughter about Hamilton. They had looked forward, those two women, with a sort of horrible longing to the first sign he should give of approaching imbecility. Every time they performed a service for him, or smarted under his utter unconsciousness of their presence, they gloried in the thought of that coming time when he should be at their mercy—he and all he had.

"Look here," Mrs. Bateson said, gasping for breath, and trembling all over in impotent fury, her eyes protruding like some mean beast of prey defrauded of its meal. "Look here, you, Mrs. Branscombe, this isn't your house yet, whatever it *may* be. Old Anne Dimsdale's niece isn't going to queen it over me until she's got some better footing to stand on than being Mr. Hamilton's fancy lady."

"Are you intoxicated or mad?" said Susy, very white and quiet. "You'd better go now. I'll speak to you in the morning."

"Me intoxicated! me mad!" cried the woman, laughing loudly. "I like that. It's not me that's mad. Oh, no! or you'd get round me as you have done round poor, crazy Mr. Hamilton. I'm sane enough to see through you and your mucky tricks—sane enough!" and her screaming voice tailed off into a burst of hysterical weeping that brought her daughter from below.

"She's says I'm drunk," gasped Mrs. Bateson, gasping and swallowing, "and that she'll speak to me in the morning. But she won't—she won't—I

shan't be here. This is no place for two respectable women like you and me, Lizzie. We can keep decent even in the workhouse if it comes to that."

"What on earth do you mean, mother?" cried Lizzie, aghast.

"Mean? I mean that she's going to keep the books and do the ordering, and make me and you keep our place in the kitchen, or maybe the coal hole would suit her ladyship better, while she sits in the parlour, if you please, with Mr. Hamilton. Well, you can get anything, if you'll pay the price. I'm thankful to say, Lizzie, that you're a respectable girl, and I wouldn't allow you to stop the night here now for untold gold. And you, Mrs. Branscombe—you can tell the Master what lies you like about me making money out of the housekeeping. I shall know how to protect myself. I've a tale to tell as well."

Susy stood up, and her stuff gown fell about her in the regal way that was strange, considering it only cost eighteenpence a yard. She altered a little from that moment, and the hidden pride began to show outwardly in her bearing; she definitely ceased to be a girl, and started to be what she afterwards became —a woman with an immense dignity of carriage.

"Please go at once," she said, "if that suits you—or you may remain until to-morrow, if you wish to do so. Mr. Hamilton gave me permission to engage fresh servants if I chose, and I do choose."

"It's all very well to bluff it out like that," retorted the woman, "but you know you'd be glad if I gave you another chance. You'd be glad to stop my mouth

if you could. You know how I shall make the country-side ring, I expect."

"Nobody bothers about the slanders of a dismissed servant," said Susy coldly. "Please close the door."

"Close it yourself," said Lizzie acidly, feeling anxious to have a turn too. "Maybe the noise'd disturb George Hamilton if I did it. *Young* George Hamilton, I mean. Ha! ha!"

Susy stood quite still until the sound of tha' malicious laughter died away in the basement; then she closed the door, and took baby in her arms, sitting perfectly motionless until Mark came in, like a person who has received a blow and has not yet awakened to the pain of it.

"Well, here we are at last," said Mark buoyantly, but no longer sure, as he had been in earlier days, that Susy shared his feelings. "You'll be tired, little woman. You look worn out."

"Oh, I'm not very tired," said Susy dully.

As Mark put his hand on her shoulder, she noticed how scarred and worn it was by the unaccustomed labour of the past months, and the sight of it brought back in a flood her tenderness for him. Poor old Mark, he was so glad to come, and he'd worked so hard and cheerfully at uncongenial labour; no wonder he was thankful to be secure at last, even at such a price.

What if he'd sold his son; any man would have done the same under the circumstances.

Then the whole cause of the bitterness and hurt rushed over her again. It was not that he had sold his son—it was he had not felt the price.

"We've had some bad times, old girl," said Mark, so anxious for her to be happy and smiling, and looking into her face as those do who have lost the key to somebody they love. "But our good times have come now. I'll go into Market Yarborough and buy a new bonnet for you, and that brooch for Aunt Dimsdale, and a rocking-horse for baby. I saw a splendid one with a long tail and a red saddle last time I was there."

"A rocking-horse for a baby his size—oh, Mark," laughed Susy; and somehow that laughter brought tears with it, so that the old Susy, all smiles and tears and tenderness, bent over her two boys in the twilight.

A sudden idea struck Mark.

"You know when we were pigging it in those little lodgings at Brightholme," he said. "Well, we thought we were rather miserable then, sometimes, didn't we? But we weren't—we were happy. You never *know*."

"When you begin to know, you begin to be not so happy," said Susy.

"But we couldn't be happier then than we are to-night, could we, just coming into all this?" And he turned a wonderfully bright face up to her.

She hadn't the heart to spoil it all. Oh, she hadn't the heart.

"No, dear; we couldn't be happier," she said softly, kissing him.

Then she went down to prepare the supper which the Batesons were far too indignant to bring into the room.

The kitchen was the pleasantest place in the house,

and Mrs. Bateson sat in a large arm-chair on the side of the fire, while Susy went in and out of the larder, searching for the various ingredients of a meal. Lizzie was upstairs packing, and a great hamper stood in the middle of the kitchen floor, into which the contents of the dresser drawers had been hastily overturned. It was not the workhouse at all which Mrs. Bateson saw before her, but a comfortable little cottage, provided with linen and other things from Saltmarsh House, abstracted piecemeal during a long number of years. She had never put all her eggs into one basket, and though she meant to stay until Hamilton could be cajoled into marrying Lizzie, she had always left herself another chance in case that went wrong. There had often been rumours of Hamilton's selling Saltmarsh, and those kept her on her guard, and encouraged her to steal and save every penny she could while the opportunity lasted.

When Susy came to the fire to warm some milk, the elder woman looked at her with concentrated spite from under motionless eyelids, and when she bent forward to lift the pan from the grate, a sly hand went out to shake her elbow and spill the heated milk. It was done on the spur of the moment, like the trick of a malicious child, but it proved the last straw to Susy's over-tired nerves, and she turned upon the housekeeper in a blaze of fury, flinging the lid of the hamper on the floor.

"There," she said, seizing a pair of silver snuffers, which had been carelessly left on top, "that is how

you've served your master, is it? Then I'm not surprised you are able to live in independence. I saw the glint of silver through the wicker work before, but I was going to let it pass—now he shall know all."

Mrs. Bateson jumped up and tried to seize the snuffers out of Susy's hands.

"They're mine, they're mine!" she shrieked. "Mr. Hamilton gave them to me."

"Then why are you so afraid of my telling him?" asked Susy.

"I'm not afraid—I'm not," panted the woman. "Give me them back."

"No," said Susy, "I shall keep them. But I shall say nothing if you behave decently until you leave this house. Do you understand? You must be civil and respectful until you leave here, or I shall tell Mr. Hamilton, and he will begin to remember, or to find out, what else you have stolen. Now warm me some more milk, if you please. You don't want him to begin to suspect, do you?"

"What reason are you going to give him for me leaving all in a minute?" muttered Mrs. Bateson, as she reluctantly went to fetch more milk.

Susy paused by the door.

"The true reason, that you were most impertinent," she said calmly. "Please bring the milk upstairs when it is ready."

So the present victory remained with Susy. She had better have accepted defeat, only she was too young yet to know the value of an enemy—her courage was still unbroken—perhaps it was of that

kind which never is broken, which never does learn to fear danger.

When she went into that long room facing the sea, where the portrait hung, she found Mark kneeling by the grate. The sea-wind blew much colder than at Suddaby.

"Let's light a fire," he said, "the place looks dreary somehow, makes me think of Hamilton and his wolf-cry howling among the sand grasses outside, and I've been reading his Omar Khayyam here, perhaps that's it."

"What on earth are you talking about?" asked Susy, fresh from her conflict with Mrs. Bateson.

"Oh, Hamilton has an idea that everybody hears a wolf-cry just outside of their lives, wailing, 'What's the good of it all?'"

"Well, scare him away with fire and light and supper," smiled Susy. But she heard it for a little while, too, as she sat listening to the sea-wind round the house, until something drove the wolf away. It happened in this manner. She first vaguely thought of the storm, then of the ships outside in the gathering autumn night, then of a coloured picture that hung in the room at Aunt Dimsdale's with the words beneath it—"So He bringeth them unto the haven whither they would be."

It was the words which did it: the wolf always slinks off before the radiance which faith creates to show the tender face of a God who watches men.

After supper Susy sat by the fire with baby in her

arms, and Mark opposite to her—they three safe in the warmth and cosy shelter.

"Isn't this a bit like that night—our first night—at the inn?" asked Mark tenderly.

"No," said Susy, shaking her head. "We're not boy and girl any more—we've grown up."

"I haven't; I won't," laughed Mark.

"Then perhaps it's only me," answered Susy.

"Why you more than myself?" said Mark. "Aren't you the younger by ever so much? Why should you feel old?"

"Perhaps its servant worries," said Susy lightly. "I'm always told they age a woman, and I have to look out for new maids to-morrow. Mrs. Bateson and Lizzie are going."

"Going? What for?" exclaimed Mark.

Susy rose with baby in her arms, and stood between firelight and lamplight, looking a little as she had done when she faced Mrs. Bateson.

"They were impertinent," she said, "and they are going. It's not worth thinking of again. We must expect a new set of worries with new circumstances, I expect. I don't mind. I'm not afraid of facing them."

She looked round the room. Mark had paid a price for Saltmarsh—he should have his full money's worth.

"You won't find me letting you down," she concluded.

"Why, I know that," said Mark. "What do you mean, Susy?"

"Nothing, only you can't expect Mrs. Branscombe

of Saltmarsh to be quite the same as little Susy Branscombe of Nowhere."

"But I want you the same, dearest," whispered Mark, with his arm round her shoulder.

Susy disengaged herself gently and went upstairs.

CHAPTER XVI

In due course two new maids arrived from Market Yarborough, but one night of Saltmarsh proved enough for them. They announced next morning that the satyr in the garden gave them the creeps, and when Susy pointed out that this was a really insufficient reason for leaving, they said, "Very well, it might be, but they couldn't '*sattle*'—there was the long and the short of it—they couldn't '*sattle*,' and they intended to go forthwith."

So, after a period of waiting, Susy procured two young females who were used to living in the country, and the sort of house-cleaning began which Saltmarsh House had never experienced before. Then Susy made herself a gown of the smuggler's brown silk for afternoons, and hired a nurse from the village for Master George Hamilton, and reigned at the head of her establishment with a vigour and thoroughness she inherited from Aunt Dimsdale. There could be nothing slipshod where Susy managed, and the pleasant order of the plain Georgian rooms, where she had altered nothing but the general slovenliness, made just the right setting for her reposeful figure. She wore her hair parted now, sweeping back over her ears, very thick and straight, without a kink in it, but shaded in colour from red to almost black. She

was not a girl any more, but a wife and mother, full of a gracious dignity that rather worried Mark; he wanted the old, laughing, impulsive, quick-tempered Susy back again. She stood more on his level.

But there was nothing wonderful in the change at all: wounded pride works on some natures in that way until they stand at full maturity on a little elevation, above their friends and acquaintance, immensely respected and admired, but not loved in a very near human way; that is the just return which humanity metes out to those who have grown too proud to give themselves away.

Susy was far enough from that state yet, of course, but she was on the road. Deep in her heart always was a sense of outrage—she had borne Mark a son whom he should have valued above everything on earth because of being her son and his—and he had let all the world see he did not care.

She felt vaguely that she was unreasonable, but nobody was ever yet soothed by that consideration—rather it adds zest to an obstinate pride, irritating and stirring it still more.

But all this pride gave rise to no mean desire for social advancement; *she* would be perfect, *she* would be fine: there was no faintest tendency on her part to look down upon those who were less so. Rather this new desire for perfection caused her to make infinite allowances for everybody else; she began to have the toleration of those who dwell a ltttle apart.

And Mark shared this quality, though in a different way. They were neither of them tarred with the smirching brush of social ambition. So when

neighbours of Hamilton's social standing remained aloof from his agent's wife, the Branscombes did not really notice the omission, because they had expected nothing. But when old friends also remained away from a fear of being considered pushing, with the odd, north-country independence which consists in avoiding a man for fear he should want to avoid you, they began to feel lonely. So they welcomed Miss Drewery's letter from London saying she had a few days at her disposal before Christmas, and asking if they could do with her. They responded joyfully that they most certainly could.

Mark met her at the station, where she alighted from the railway carriage with every appointment of a lady of means visiting influential friends. Her rug, her bag with gilt initials, her costume subdued but, as she complacently knew, *the right thing*. She had sent one home to a duchess almost exactly like it the week before.

The porter followed her, carrying bag and rug with great deference.

Then the stationmaster came up and shook hands, calling her Miss Ada, and recalling how they had gone to the national school together at Suddaby thirt—well, he wouldn't say how many years ago. The porter put the smart and appropriate baggage into Mark's dogcart, wondering what the world was coming to, and Miss Drewery reminded the stationmaster that he was just leaving the school, while she was in the infant class.

"An infant in a bustle and a curled fringe," said the stationmaster, recovering from her grand manner

as he watched her drive away. "That's the sort of infant she was. Why, she's older than me, and the airs and graces—"

"Beggars on horseback all of 'em at Saltmarsh House," returned the porter ingratiatingly. "Rum arrangement that. Is Mr. Hamilton beginning to go dotty already, or are those tales of Mrs. Bateson's true, do you think? It's a queer thing, calling the boy George Hamilton, without—"

"Not a word of truth in it," said the stationmaster shortly. "I've known Mrs. Branscombe since she was a child, and I'd as soon suspect my own daughter of anything wrong. Mr. Hamilton always was a crank. He took a fancy to Mark Branscombe, and gave him a job after that Grammar School row; now he's taken him on again in the same capacity—that's all."

"But what about adopting the boy?" pursued the porter.

"Well, why shouldn't he? What's them empties doing there? Clear 'em away at once," said the stationmaster, retiring to his office. "We don't pay men to stand gossiping on the platform," he added unjustly over his shoulder.

Susy was so glad to see Cousin Ada again that she forgot everything else; and she sat with her in the spare bedroom, holding out young George for inspection, with a flushed face and hair a little disordered, just like the girl whom Miss Drewery had taught manners to in the boarding-house, and not a bit as she expected the mistress of Saltmarsh to be from Aunt Dimsdale's letters.

"Well," she said, "I'm glad, Susy, I'm sure, to find you so comfortably settled. It all seems like a miracle, somehow; but the older you get the more you find there can *be* miracles; and I daresay if all was known it's beginning to come on already."

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Susy.

"Why, Mr. Hamilton's queerness, of course," said Miss Drewery, "else why should—"

"You think he's mad, and that we're taking advantage of that?" cried Susy. Then she smiled. "You haven't seen him lately. Do you remember him in London? Did he seem mad to you then? There's never been any fear of it until he grows quite old; but if that's what people think," she added uneasily, "we must talk to Mark. We can't—"

"Rubbish!" interposed Miss Drewery, wishing she had held her tongue. "Of course anybody's mad that does anything kinder or better or cleverer than other people. I heard that in a sermon last Sunday. It's always been so. They stoned the prophets."

"But Mr. Hamilton is not in the least like a prophet, or anyone of that kind," pursued Susy, not to be turned aside. "He does things because he wants to do them, that's all. Oh, I wish to goodness we'd never seen him."

The real truth was out then, for the first time, and the sound of it startled herself. The instinct which scented danger in connection with Hamilton was spontaneous, without ground or reason, but it was suddenly very strong.

However, Miss Drewery was one who let the light

of common-sense in upon most subjects, and she had quite forgotten that dark five minutes in the boarding-house bedroom, when she herself had felt her curbed and well-trained nature kick beneath the disturbing influence of Hamilton's personality. It's easy to cheapen earthquakes in another hemisphere, or to defy the sleeping gods—but when earthquakes shake, ever so little, our own dwellings — when the gods stir—

"You make too much fuss about Mr. Hamilton," said Miss Drewery. "You think there's something deep in all he does, and I believe both you and Mark are afraid of him. Shoo! That's because they're such a plain lot round here. Now I'd the Duke of Basingstairs come in with the duchess last week—there *is* somebody—millions a year, and the finest country-house in the world—put Mr. Hamilton beside a man like that!"

Susy rose and looked down thoughtfully at Miss Drewery's carefully frizzled head.

"He'd still be fine," she said. "That's just it. He'd still be fine."

Then they went down to supper, and there was no more talk about Hamilton until the next afternoon, when Susy and her guest sat sewing in the long room where the first Mrs. Hamilton's portrait hung above the mantel-piece. The light, of course, had gone round to the west, so all the picture lay in shadow save for the warm flesh tints and gay, blue eyes.

"Mr. Hamilton gets nothing from his great-grandmother but that reckless sort of look," said Miss

Drewery. "Funny he could write such an amusing book. But I believe the different parts of him aren't mixed up so well as they are in other people; in you and me, for instance. You get to know life, being in a dressmaker's shop, and there are folks like that—badly mixed. So the bad is all in a lump, and the good, and the gay, and the sad, and it comes out so—do you see?"

"N—no," said Susy, with reluctant honesty, "I don't."

"Oh, well," said Miss Drewery indifferently, she herself was not greatly interested in abstract questions. Then a bell rang in the distance. "My!" she exclaimed, with a thrill of real excitement, "here's somebody coming to call. What a mercy I changed my dress!"

"Oh, no," smiled Susy, "we don't have callers here."

"Mrs. Walker," announced the housemaid, with an air, glad to have someone to show in properly at last.

Mrs. Walker advanced in her oldest coat and skirt, and a motor cap. Only the fact that a rival doctor to her husband had settled two miles away would have induced her to come at all, but patients were scarce, and Dr. Walker was very hard up. The short skirt and motor cap were her protest against these circumstances which drove a former Miss Green of Marshby-le-Grove to call upon the Branscombes.

Susy rose with the new dignity which had come to her of late, and moved across the room with the brown silk gown flowing round her to meet the little weather-beaten woman who listened to the rustle

and felt at once that all the vague, floating rumours were true. She *had* to feel that, or to be so hideously at a disadvantage.

After a restrained greeting, she sat down, prepared to make desultory conversation for ten minutes and then retire.

"Your cousin from London?" she said, on being introduced. "Ah, I was up myself last week. My aunt was taking part in a bazaar, and I went to assist her. It was held at Basingstairs House. You'll have heard, perhaps, of the Duchess of Basingstairs—a delightful woman—quite one of the old grandes dames."

Miss Drewery knew a little, a very little, French, but she was able to use it.

"Ah, yes, noblesse oblige," she responded airily. "It is so indeed. The duchess remarked to me on the day after the bazaar that she didn't mind whom she let into her house in the cause of charity—she'd ask a clean coster as soon as a countess. But, of course, we all know what she is about her private visiting list."

"Y—yes," said Mrs. Walker, bewildered. "You know the duchess, then?"

"Not intimately," replied Miss Drewery. "Do you?"

"No, it's my aunt," responded Mrs. Walker vaguely. Then she turned her back on Miss Drewery and pointedly addressed her hostess. "I suppose you don't know much of this gay London life, Mrs. Branscombe? We went to see *The New Puritans*, a delightful thing that's been running for

ages. You must get your husband to take you up for a night to see it—I always think a few theatres brush one up so—and you must find it dull here, knowing nobody in the neighbourhood. They are such an exclusive lot."

She hadn't started out intending to be unpleasant, but she felt obliged to place herself in the superior position again, and that of knowing everybody round Saltmarsh, while Susy did not, lay ready to her tongue.

Susy flushed uneasily, and the memory of Mrs. Bateson's words shot into her mind; but with an effort she controlled her voice and said simply:

"I didn't expect the people to call on me, Mrs. Walker. You see I have my own friends at Suddaby, not so far away, and I am quite content—with them."

"Oh, of course—I never meant—" stammered Mrs. Walker. "And *The New Puritans*—you'll be sure to go and see *The New Puritans* when you're next in town?"

"I've seen it," said Susy, all the details of that night coming back to her, but without their glow and thrill, because memory cannot hold emotion, only facts.

"Mrs. Branscombe and I were there a year ago," said Miss Drewery. "The piece has had a splendid run. I remember we only secured our box owing to its being returned at the last minute by Lady Carberry. She went suddenly into mourning for her sister, and mentioned the subject of the returned box when I saw her next morning. Perhaps you know her? Charming woman."

"I don't exactly know her," said Mrs. Walker, "but my aunt, Mrs. Dewsthorpe—"

"The secretary to the Woman's Charitable Guild!" exclaimed Miss Drewery. "Of course. I remember well her getting the post. What a fortunate thing for her, with that young family. So Lady Carberry remarked at the time. A clergyman's widow, I believe? Most deserving case."

Mrs. Walker rose to go.

"I should scarcely call my aunt a *case*," she said, with marked coldness. "A lady who is third cousin to the Bishop of Mandelay cannot surely be called a *case*."

"Mrs. Farrow and Miss Dimsdale," announced the new house-maid, with a flourish; and amid a confused medley of, "Aunt Dimsdale," "Cousin Ada," and "Susy, my dear," Mrs. Walker took her leave, with her hand to her head and a whirling brain. A person who knew Duchesses and called the third cousin of the Bishop a "case," and Miss Dimsdale at the shop "Aunt," was more than she could assimilate all at once. But before she reached home she felt clear on one point—Susy *was* a fancy lady—no respectable person's cousin could make a former Miss Green look foolish. The only flaw in this theory—which Dr. Walker pointed out—was the continued absence of Hamilton.

As soon as the door closed behind the doctor's wife, Miss Drewery burst out laughing.

"I know her kind," she said. "They come to the shop talking about some titled person or other and want clothes home on appro'. Then they copy the

pattern and send things back soiled. I know 'em. My word, she was fairly puzzled. I'll teach her to look down on us."

Susy flushed again: Cousin Ada did not yet know the hideous gossip which the dismissed housekeeper might be spreading.

"Oh, never mind Mrs. Walker," she said. "I'm too pleased to see Aunt Dimsdale to bother about her. What good wind blew you here this afternoon, Mrs. Farrow?"

"Well, it was a Christmas bullock," said that lady literally. "My husband had to see one in Saltmarsh for his brother at Market Yarborough—the butcher, you know, who is piling up money like anything, so I thought I'd come too, and bring Miss Dimsdale with me."

"I hadn't time to do anything but slip on my best bonnet and my turquoise brooch," added Miss Dimsdale. "Jim Pyne's minding the shop; he's got rheumatics, and wasn't at work to-day. You'd do better, Susy, to put the best cups and saucers away and use a plainer set, for those servant lasses'll smash this fine china all to bits; and I should stand the table nearer the fireplace if it was me."

"There's more good china than could ever be used, even if we were careless," said Susy; "but we're not. You mustn't forget that you brought me up, aunt. I'm not likely to sit down and let the girls do as they like after the training I had with you."

"I should make them stir about in a house like this," said Miss Dimsdale, glancing round at the heavy, solid furniture. "There's something to go at

here." She sighed. "I wish I'd had your chances. I could have managed—"

"A London hotel," interposed Mrs. Farrow solemnly. "That you could; or a lunatic asylum. Talking of asylums, that brings me to Mr. Hamilton."

"Why should it?" said Susy. "He's as sane as you or I."

Mr. Farrow, entering at that moment, answered for his wife.

"Can't be," he said. "No sane man gives up property. Law of Nature—he! he!"

"Tea's ready, 'm," said the intensely curious housemaid. "Master's just coming across the field."

Mark came in a moment later, all aglow with health and exercise, and truly delighted to welcome his guests. He was a man who loved company and the warm feeling that he was giving food and pleasure; and he pressed cold ham and lemon cheesecakes upon Mr. Farrow, until even that gentleman was obliged to cry "Halt."

"Never had as many lemon cheesecakes as I could eat before," he sighed, pushing his chair back from the table. "Missus always puts the stopper on after the fourth or fifth. By the way, talking of stoppers, I met Jones coming along. Been at a sale somewhere in this direction, it seems. He'd been taking stoppers off, I should say. He! he! You picked the right man after all, Mrs. Branscombe. This beats Jones's house in Market Yarborough all to fits, and he's spared no expense, mind you. Wish some crazy fine gent would take a fancy to me. He! he! But that Jones has a nasty tongue," he

added reminiscently, glancing at his wife. "Might try to make out it was Mrs. Farrow that the gent fancied."

Mark was engaged in offering more strawberry jam, so he did not hear, but Susy felt the colour again rising to her cheeks. She was growing to be nervously afraid of such remarks, and unable to hide her consciousness of them when they came. Farrow was silent and grave for some moments after his careless glance at her, sharpened into surprise at her confusion, then he went to the window and shook his head decidedly at the satyr in the garden.

The satyr leered unpleasantly back again between the tangled dead creepers.

"I'd as soon think it of my own wife," insisted Mr. Farrow, carrying on some imperceptible argument.

The satyr still leered, of course, because he couldn't do anything else.

"Confound you!" said Mr. Farrow violently, addressing the satyr.

"*What!*" exclaimed Mrs. Farrow, in a terrible tone. Then she turned to the company. "This is what comes," she remarked, "of letting a man have all he wants. With one cheesecake he's pleased, with two he's having a treat, with seven he uses language! That's a man all over."

Then she rose, too, and the cart came round, and the three visitors drove off down the long straight road to Suddaby. As Mark and Susy went back into the house, they had that pleasant sense of going back into their own place—they two together—which lasts a long time with a husband and wife who care

for each other; neither Susy's pride nor Mark's dawning sense of injury had touched that yet.

"You've had a long day, Mark," said Susy, putting her hand through his arm.

"Yes," said Mark. "Oh, I meant to have told you. I met the postman as I went out this morning, and he gave me a letter from Mr. Hamilton."

Susy drew her hand away for fear Mark should notice she was uneasy.

"Yes?" she said.

"He wants to come here after Christmas for a few weeks," answered Mark. "Then he's going off to Canada for good."

"For his good, I hope," said Susy. "I do hope that, Mark, otherwise we have no business to take all this."

"Canada's no worse," said Mark, "than an open-air cure, or anything like that. It's a rational chance of health and sanity—and he's got something back from us. He's got somebody who'll look after him in his old age. That was always a mania of his—he was afraid of being left to servants. Funny thing, that craving he had for a son."

"It does seem funny, doesn't it?" said Susy, in an odd tone. "You can't understand it, can you?"

"No," said Mark thoughtlessly; then he caught sight of his wife's face. "Susy, I didn't mean—"

But she was out of hearing.

CHAPTER XVII

THE days and weeks went by in this way until February was half over, and the lanes running inland began to smell of violets on warm days, though it was long before violet time, as the earth does in the first sunshine of spring in the north country.

Earlier and earlier every day the sun touched the satyr in the garden, and fell through the windows upon the great mahogany bed in Susy's room. This morning the baby lay on it asleep while the nurse went downstairs for a moment, and Mark came in quietly, to fetch a letter he had left there.

The household at Saltmarsh was early astir, and the fine February dawn was only just rising over the sea; streaks of rose and amber shone over the water and upon the white sheets and pillows of the great bed, and upon the little sleeping face. The tiny eyelids quivered, opened, and Mark and his son looked at each other.

As they looked, something awoke in Mark which had been dormant before and could never go to sleep again now it was once aroused. He had awakened as baby did amid the crimson and gold of that February dawn. In that moment before nurse came back the silent bond which knits father and son had passed between them—the old strong bond that bears

the biggest strain of any in the world—and Mark understood at last the patriarchal triumph of the song, "Unto us a son is given!"

Then he went down to breakfast, and said to Susy: "The little chap begins to take notice."

"He has for *months!*" replied Susy indignantly. "Mrs. Farrow says he's the most forward baby she ever saw in her life, and that we shall have to keep him back."

"Well, we won't send him to Market Yarborough Grammar School," said Mark, half ruefully.

"That'll be Mr. Hamilton's affair, I expect," said Susy. "You know he was to be consulted about George's education."

"Oh, yes," said Mark, "I'd forgotten that." And he very thoughtfully finished his breakfast.

The next day Hamilton was to arrive from town in order to pay a farewell visit to the house about which a thousand suggestions hung, for him, of pain and dreariness. Every piece of furniture loomed darkly, watchful for the appointed hour when he should cower over the iron grate, and do as others told him with the grumbling servility of an old man who has been mastered—but as he was going to disappoint these stuffy, watchful chairs and tables, he was no longer afraid of what they suggested to him.

When he drove up from the gate, Susy stood in the doorway waiting for him; and the darkness of the hall behind, where it was already twilight, absorbed the colours of the brown silk gown and of her brown hair, only leaving the soft contours of

her face to be touched into relief by the grey light of the afternoon.

"There's Susy waiting for us," said Mark, rather nervous at the position in which he found himself, for it was awkward to be welcoming a man's return to his own house and his own son, which were yet not his, but Mark's own. And his fine manner struck Mark afresh—the sort of manner which kings ought to have—so absolutely natural and at leisure from small personal preoccupations that it placed him a little above those with whom he came in contact.

Hamilton jumped out of the cart and ran bare-headed up the steps to greet Susy. They stood together for a moment against the dim background behind, and Mark, reining in his horse, glanced at them with a sharp feeling of dismay which he knew no reason for; but they made such a gallant picture, framed by the Georgian portico of the house, that there seemed to be no need for anyone else in it, and he vaguely realised this as he took the cart round to the stables.

Susy gave her hand to Hamilton in the oddest tumult of conflicting feelings. A sort of gratified exultation—here was the man who thought her boy worth so much, and she loved him for it. A sort of resentment—here was the man who had tempted Mark to sell his paternal rights, and she hated him for it. Then a sort of shame—here was the man whose fancy lady—

A strong recoil made her move back into the shadows, and Hamilton stood on the threshold of his house alone.

He did not follow her immediately, because he needed a breathing space to let his heart cry out, "Hail, oh Queen!" He saw at once that Susy was not a princess any more, whom a king might desire to be the mother of his children; she was a queen now whom any king might want to share the throne. He had forgotten a little, in the long time since they met, what she was like; but there would be no fear of his forgetting again so long as he lived.

Then he went inside, and George Hamilton was brought down for him to look at.

He took the child awkwardly in his arms and looked down at the little face which was already beginning to be like Mark's, and the futility of the whole thing struck at him like a hammer.

"A sturdy little chap," he said, "and your own son, Branscombe. He'll be that if he's called twenty times Hamilton. By the way, I've put his name down for Winchester, subject to your approval, of course. It was my old school, and I have a sort of affection for it."

Mark felt himself flushing with annoyance; Susy had been right, it was Hamilton's business, of course; yet he looked at his boy and wished he could have had a say in the matter—they'd have talked it over together—he and George—when the lad grew old enough.

"Oh, Winchester is a splendid school, isn't it?" Susy exclaimed, "the very best kind of school in the world."

"I think so," smiled Hamilton.

Susy smiled very kindly back at him for

thinking the very best only good enough for her child.

Next morning the weather was lovely again, and Mark went off to the market, while Susy walked with Hamilton. She left a thousand things in the house to do it, because she felt to him rather as if he were a man condemned who must be given all he wanted, and he had asked for her company.

His last spring in England!

The very thought of it was enough to make her wish every violet to bloom its best, and to hope the tree-buds would burst earlier than usual.

"Can't you ever come back?" she said, as they turned towards the river bank; the same river which flowed through Suddaby and entered the sea here at Saltmarsh.

"No," said Hamilton, looking across the familiar landscape. "No; I can't come back. It's the complete break with all past associations that the doctor hopes so much from; and I'd be flayed alive if I could die sane, you know."

"You've got your father's end on your mind," said Susy gently. "Wouldn't it do just as well if you were to stay here, and give yourself up to some strong interest, heart and soul? Wouldn't that save you? If you cared tremendously for some woman—somebody who was good and strong, and not afraid? Well, you'd be not afraid either."

She stood still in her earnestness, and the light wind blew her garments round her fine figure; the grey February sky was behind her; she looked just what she described—good and strong and not afraid.

For a moment as Hamilton gazed at her, those words, "not afraid," roused the devil in him. He measured then all her tenderness and pride, and the follies and mistakes into which the two combined might drive her under his influence. He had noticed her hidden resentment against Mark, and her pity for himself. He had felt how something in her responded to something in him as they stood together on the threshold the night before.

If he had been free to love her first, she would have loved him. He knew that, too, as he stood there watching her, though she thought herself that she could never have loved anyone but Mark.

"Not afraid!"

A woman who is tender and loving and strong should always be afraid—

Even now his strange eyes, gay and reckless, yet able to compel, drew Susy's gaze until she felt herself to be losing hold on something.

"Look at that trout," he said quietly, turning his glance away from her. But his face showed lines she had not noticed before as they walked on again.

For a certain distance they went silently, both immersed in their own thoughts — Susy, vaguely annoyed that any man but Mark could have power to disturb her, though she had not one faintest doubt of her own love and loyalty to her husband. She began to wonder if this strange quality in Hamilton were a part of his unsoundness of mind—if he really were unfit to dispose of his property, and they were to blame for taking advantage of the freak of a man not quite sane.

Then she glanced sideways at him, and the idea seemed incredible. If ever a man looked clear-minded and sane and powerful of thought, Hamilton did as he walked beside her with those stern lines about his mouth.

It would be an insult added to the injury his forebodings had done him were she to hint that he had not the right to do as he liked with his own property and his own future.

Still, he might have made the offer on the spur of the moment; she would give him a chance of escape.

"Mr. Hamilton," she said, when they came to one of the black wooden bridges, "let us sit here and rest a little. Now you can just see Saltmarsh House between those willows. I love a flat country—don't you? You can breathe. I hate places all shut in by hills. You'll—you'll often think of the flat land round Saltmarsh—and the sea-grass blowing on the edge of the sands—and noise of the wind when it goes round the house?"

"No," said Hamilton, "I shall never think of them. When such thoughts come I shall get up and work until I drop asleep from sheer fatigue. I'm going out there to an empty life—I don't want to fill it with memories."

"But supposing the doctor's wrong," said Susy; "then you'll have given up everything for nothing. Oh, Mr. Hamilton, think it over again. Don't go unless you're quite sure. Sell Saltmarsh—you can still—the deeds of gift are not yet signed: and try in some other part of England."

"What's to become of George Hamilton, junior?" asked his godfather, smiling.

"You could always take an interest in him just the same," urged Susy. "He should go to you if you ever needed him just the same. And Mark could find something to do somewhere. We need so little—it was only because I was ill that we got so stranded before. Oh, do think it over again, and stay if you can. I can't help believing you've made a mistake."

"No," said Hamilton, "I've done the first wise action of my life. Don't try to turn me back."

Susy rose and stood on the bridge, with the water below and the sky above her, her colouring very fresh and soft against the grey, her eyes eagerly wide, and her lips parted to speak before he finished.

"Then try a year," she urged. "Don't go this spring. Wait until next year, and have another spring with us. I should hate to feel we were taking an advantage—that—that we'd got Saltmarsh out of you because—because—"

His eyes grew so stern that she lost her self-command and stumbled hopelessly.

"You think people will say, or that they are saying, you have taken advantage of a man who is not responsible for his actions?" Hamilton asked, his lips very white. "Is that what you mean?"

"No—yes. Oh, I don't know. I didn't mean to hurt you," said Susy, her eyes filling with tears.

"It's nothing new," said Hamilton. "If I do anything bad—that's the madness leaking out. If I do anything fairly decent—well, that's madness too; but I hoped you'd take it differently. I hoped

you'd see that I was sane and just like other men—as yet. I think Mark sees it."

He turned with a tremendous faith and gratitude to the thought of Mark as he spoke—Mark who believed in him and honoured his judgment. And Susy vaguely felt that her husband had proved greater than she was, in his very simplicity and straightforwardness.

"Mark is right," she said humbly. "He's taken it all plainly, just as you've given it, without searching round for all sorts of reasons and results. I'll try to take it that way too, now, Mr. Hamilton. But of course you can't—"

She broke off. It was impossible to tell anyone how she felt about Mark's giving up the child and not caring.

"We'll walk back by the sea; the tide's going down," she said, turning from the bridge to a path across the fields.

They were silent again until they came, through a gap in the sandhills, upon the hard sand. The tide was very far down, as it is in those parts, and little pink and yellow and white shells, just like the petals of flowers, lay scattered about, with other long-shaped shells that the children call knives and forks. As Susy and Hamilton walked, they began to gather them, and spoke of the time when little George would run down through the garden, past the old satyr, and get them for himself. The fresh, salt air and the quick movement had lessened the tension of Susy's thoughts, and their pleasant, simple talk about the child made her quite calm again.

"Then you'll think it over," she said, when she went in. "Not," hastily, as he frowned, "about keeping Saltmarsh, but about waiting for another year. I do wish you'd just have another spring in England. You love England so—you're made that way. And there are no springs like we have here, so gradual and long. I wish you'd have another."

She put out her hand in her eager kindness, and he took it.

"Susy, *you* want me to have another? Then shall I spend the year with you at Saltmarsh?"

"Oh, yes," she answered. "Then you can watch baby grow, and we'll have long walks together again, and I'll try to make you have a happy year."

"Almost," he still held her hand, "as if you and baby belonged to me?"

"Yes; then you won't feel alone in the world when you're out there," she assented eagerly.

"And if at the end of that year I found I couldn't go," he said; "what then?"

"Why, then you'd stay, and we shouldn't feel we were taking everything from you—that would be splendid!" she cried.

"Should I do it?" he said, keeping her hand still, but not speaking to her at all. "Should I do it?"

He was looking at her face, but she moved a little forward and the satyr leered over her shoulder. He dropped her hand.

"No," he said unevenly. "I think I'll stick to my original plan. Thank you all the same. I—I believe there's somebody coming for you."

A heavy step crunched down the gravel path, and

Mrs. Walker bowed with frigid civility. She had seen Hamilton drop Susy's hand, and avoided taking it herself, though Susy held it out.

"Good-morning," she said, "I am sorry to disturb you. I have come for the Coal Club subscription, and was told I should find Mrs. Branscombe in the garden. I can call another time."

"Oh, please don't trouble," Susy said, nervously conscious of the gossip which surrounded herself and Hamilton, and knowing that the Batesons were protégées of Mrs. Walker. "I will ask my husband to send a cheque for the amount when he comes home. He is at the market."

The husband was at the market.

That was another item to add to her story with which Mrs. Walker could regale the next people she called upon for a subscription. She simply loved these collecting rounds because they gave her a chance to pay shortish calls all day long upon people she did not visit in the ordinary way; and she was thus able to gratify her love of gossip without compromising herself socially. The neighbours whom she considered her equals were all far off and not interested in the village gossip; but she knew that even they would be agog to hear about Hamilton. He had been an unfailing topic from youth upwards, and Mrs. Walker felt she must have a little conversation with him to carry away; it was an opportunity too good to miss, so she swallowed her disapprobation for the moment and said, quite ignoring Susy's remark:

"We hear you are leaving England permanently, Mr. Hamilton, I trust it is not true?"

"You're very good," said Hamilton.

"I've also been told that you have adopted Mrs. Branscombe's son," she continued, "and that he has taken your name; but one does hear such ridiculous stories, one wonders where they come from."

"You don't wonder—much—if you live in this neighbourhood," said Hamilton, bowing very politely.

Whatever did he mean? Then the meaning burst upon her, and she gasped—he actually meant that she—

"Do you intend to say that I invent or carry gossip?" she demanded, breathless with indignation.

"I hope I am not so ill-mannered to a lady in my own garden," replied Hamilton. "Have you heard any more interesting stories?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Walker, "I have. So much so, that nothing but Christian charity and good feeling would have brought me here to-day—nothing else in the world!" and she stumped off with her elbows very square and her subscription book pressed to her chest like a shield.

For a moment Hamilton watched her, then he murmured to himself: "I mustn't let her go like that," and caught her up before she reached the road.

"Mrs. Walker," he said, "you must forgive me. I'm naturally sore on the point which obliges me to leave my home and all my old associations; you know what that point is. And as I can never have a son of my own I've adopted that of my former

agent and friend. A poor substitute; but I'm not fond of talking about it all, even to old friends like yourself."

"I meant no offence," said Mrs. Walker, still heated, "and if you will fly in the face of convention—"

"Haven't I always?" said Hamilton, his eyes very gay and pleading. "Did you ever know me different?"

There was something about Hamilton in that mood which a woman untried in intercourse with men of his type found it difficult to resist, for Dr. Walker had no such weapons at command as Hamilton possessed.

"You've always done what you've liked," she owned unwillingly, "but that doesn't make it *right*."

"I've not had a woman like you to keep me right," he said seriously. "If I had, things might have been different," he sighed.

"Begin now," urged Mrs. Walker, seizing the bait. "And anything I can do to help you— But why do it? Why mix yourself up with the Branscombes?"

"That's all sealed and signed, dear lady," said Hamilton. "That's done, for better or worse, and can't be undone. I want you to help us all to make the best of—of a possible mistake."

It was difficult to say, but he said it, and Mrs. Walker put out a cotton-gloved hand in return.

"I'll do my best," she said, "for your sake. Of course Mrs. Branscombe's relations are a queer lot, and there should be some higher social influence."

"I felt sure *you* would understand me," said

Hamilton, still holding the cotton-gloved hand though it set his teeth on edge. "A man who has knocked about the world as I have feels a difference. If you lived in London you are the sort of woman who would gather what was noblest and best about her, but never allow anyone to cross the line that stands between friendship and love."

Mrs. Walker allowed her cotton glove to remain in Hamilton's grasp, and gave a deep sigh.

"That's exactly what I have always hoped to be," she said, "but nobody has put it into words before. Ah, *you* understand too, Mr. Hamilton."

So he released her glove, and she went away in a glow of sentiment such as she had not felt since Dr. Walker wooed her over a manual on poultry-keeping.

Hamilton returned to Susy, who was still in the garden facing the sea.

"There," he said, "she'll be all right now. I should keep on civil terms with her as you are going to live at Saltmarsh."

"She wouldn't," said Susy, flushing.

"Yes, she will. She understands me now," said Hamilton, with a smile, "and hopes to take an interest in young George."

"How did you do it?" wondered Susy. "What did you say?"

"Oh, nothing particular. I just explained," answered Hamilton vaguely.

"Well," said Susy, "I might have explained until all was blue; it would have made no difference. But of course I couldn't have done it in the same way," she added.

She had an immense opinion of Hamilton's intelligence now, and was ceasing to disapprove of him.

"No," replied Hamilton, "you don't know that way; you never will."

Susy walked a few steps towards the house, and the embarrassment, which accorded so ill with her new-found dignity that it was doubly noticeable, vanished entirely from her.

"I wish you wouldn't be so nervous of these people," said Hamilton suddenly. "There's no reason why you should be, and they'll begin to invent one if you go on doing it. Nobody, seeing you as you are now, would believe you could be embarrassed without some good reason. They might a few months ago, but not now."

"Have I altered so?" said Susy.

"Only grown from a princess to a queen," answered Hamilton.

"Please don't say things like that," said Susy gravely. "You know I was just an ordinary girl out of Suddaby village who made dresses by the day —just like any little farmer's daughter for miles around."

"But Mark called you a princess, too, you know— a Princess of Furbelows," smiled Hamilton.

"Ah, Mark — that's different," said Susy. "I belong to Mark."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE March wind blew the sea, which was usually rather dead and leaden about Saltmarsh, into quite frolicsome breakers with white crests on top, and gleaming green and blue in the troughs between. The gulls began to think of building higher up the coast, Flamborough way, and there was a stir and rustle of real spring this time in every little wood between Suddaby and the shore.

Hamilton's time was growing very short. In six weeks from now he would be saying good-bye for life to the familiar scents and sounds of the little place that had belonged to him. He was going forth in quest of something he wanted more even than the country he loved—and that was the guidance of his own actions until he had to die. There was an arrogant independence about him that could not brook the prospect of becoming the slave of anyone who chose to govern him. He had protected himself against that at any cost, so far as he could do so, and the secret spring of all his actions lay in that.

But another factor was gaining force now, stronger than any fear for his own future—his feeling for Susy was deepening from an almost whimsical fancy to a love such as few men could experience. A man would have to be as placed apart, as experienced, as

imaginative as Hamilton had been, to know the freshness and depth of his love for Mark's wife. He brought all the force of knowledge to aid all the tender reverence of first love in his feeling for her—the glamour a boy sees in a girl when he has never loved before—the reverence of a man who worships *the* woman, not Woman in the person of the beloved.

And Susy was kind to him as she never would have been had she not known he was, in a way, condemned to death. He was going to die to all he had ever known, and an immense pity moved her to make the last days as happy as she could. If he wanted her to walk with him when she felt her duty to be with Mark or the baby she put that on one side—she had all life to give to Mark and baby.

It was impossible for her not to know how she comforted Hamilton, and she never thought he was in love with her, though there lurked in the bottom of her mind a suspicion that he might be if she chose—but no real woman has ever thought the worse of a man for that; she'll just make herself the more worth loving, and pity the poor devil, setting him, if she can, on his way to heaven without her.

Mark, however, could not be expected to follow the windings of a woman's logic, and he stayed more and more out in the fields, or drove on not very important errands to distant villages. He, too, was very sorry for Hamilton; but he wanted his wife to himself, and felt out of it when he came home and found Susy planning enthusiastically about young George's future, or walking, deep in confidential talk, with the elder George in the garden.

About Mark, Hamilton had no scruples; he was getting so tremendously the best of it—let him wait a little—he'd all life in which to be comforted by Susy, not a poor six weeks.

So Mark used to go up to the nursery a good deal when he came home at nights, and hold more silent conversations with his son. They were getting to know each other—those two—and Mark had really forgotten the blank time which lay between baby's birth and that February dawning: he would have said, if anyone asked him, that he had always thought a lot of the little chap.

But Susy's pitiful heart was so full of Hamilton just now that she never noticed this; he had a way of dominating the thoughts of those he was concerned with, and how much more those of a woman he loved; so she grew to be engrossed with what he had said, or what he was going to say, while Mark and baby, somehow, faded for a little.

One morning she watched Mark go off to the fields, and then superintended baby's departure in his pram. It was this very March morning with white crested waves, and gleaming green and blue lights, when the sea-gulls fled screaming towards their haunts about Flamborough—just six weeks before Hamilton went away.

"Should we drive over to Byland's Wood?" he said. "It's a fine day, and there's nothing prettier than a wood just before the trees begin to bud. I want to speak to the keeper about the partridge eggs —Mark isn't inclined to preserve much there, and I think he's right. The people come over from Market

Yarborough for the sea breezes and disturb the game so much that it isn't worth while. The wood'll be a building plot before we know where we are."

Susy listened to the trot of the horse's feet on the way, and she felt it right in common honesty to hold Hamilton back from leaving all this—she must just try once more.

The far black mass of woodland against delicate grey-blue sky was becoming more distinct: she must speak before they got there.

"Mr. Hamilton," she said, taking her courage in both hands. "Don't you think it would be braver to stop and chance it? To just go on day by day, and chance it?"

He turned sharply round. His blood coursing quickly with health and strength and the spring day made him ready to chance anything. He had lost sight of the end in this glorious moment of present living, and he was ready then to barter all the ignominy of senile age for a little while with Susy.

"Do you think," he said, "that I want to go?"

"No," she answered, "you think you're acting for the best, but I believe you're making a mistake. You've got this—this fear of going insane—on your nerves. If you'd stay and work and think of other things, you would be just as well among your old friends and old associations."

He stared at the horse's ears—listened to the "Cop, cop," of the horse's feet.

"Perhaps I should," he said, drawing a long breath. "Perhaps I should. Anyway—anyway—I'll stay if you want me to stay. I'm more afraid of

leaving you, Susy, than of going mad. I never thought any fear in me could grow as strong as that —because I'm not—I'm not a coward."

"I'm a help to you, am I?" said Susy. "Oh, stay then. We'll all help you—Mark and George and I —don't go."

He glanced aside at her profile, very womanly and sweet against the delicate blue-grey sky: and he took the silly old way of saying what he wanted her to know.

"I should like to tell you something," he said. "I have a friend who loves a woman. But she does not care for him excepting as a very great friend. Still, she is so terribly sorry for him that she begins to think really more about him than about those she loves."

"I could understand that," said Susy gently. "Do I know the woman?"

Her simplicity touched him, his tense look grew quieter and very kind.

"No," he said, "you don't know that woman—you never will know her. But I do so well—so well that I'm going away now for fear of bringing her unhappiness. That's a third fear I've found, Susy, you see, stronger than my fear of leaving you."

"You'd forgotten that when you spoke of going a few moments ago?" said Susy, hurt to find there was somebody else, though she did not want Hamilton for her lover, as a real woman will be. "Does she—have you told her how you care?"

"No," said Hamilton, "I shall let time tell her that; I think time will, some day."

"But she'll be so sorry," said Susy, "to think that she never thanked you for—for all that love when you were here; if she lives in England?"

Susy did so want to know who the woman was.

They had tied the horse to the wood gate, and were standing just within the ride when she said that, the bare branches let the sun through in pale flakes of gold on her shoulders and flowing skirt.

"She lives in a fairy land," he said, "where nothing sordid nor poor nor mean shall ever enter if I can help it. So she'll go with me to Canada, you see, and come walking to me along a fairy road, just as she would in England. That's the advantage of loving a lady of fairyland. You can't leave her."

"But you said you *were* leaving her," insisted Susy "I suppose she's a real person."

"Oh, very real," said Hamilton, smiling as no one had ever seen him smile save Susy. "Oh, so very real. It's my idea of her I'm taking with me, that's all."

"You contradict yourself," said Susy, rather severely. "And I can't help thinking it a pity you should carry about with you the idea of a lady who doesn't know, and whom you'll never see any more. She may marry, and what then?"

"Whatever she does she'll still be my fairy queen —I shan't know, you see," said Hamilton.

"But if she's a nice woman," pursued Susy, "she won't want you to be thinking of her when she's got a husband and perhaps children of her own. She won't like it at all."

"Won't she?" said Hamilton. Then with a look

half-laughing, half-sad, he dropped on one knee upon the young grass—he could do those things without looking foolish.

"Won't she?" he repeated, "not if I kneel to her always like this in my thoughts. Let us pretend that you're the fairy queen—should *you* mind if I thought of you like this?"

Susy glanced down at him, the spring light flickering about her, her honest brown eyes disturbed and questioning.

"No," she said slowly. "I don't think I should mind, but I'm a married lady now, and you know I am. With her it's different—you've been thinking that you want her."

"Yes," he answered, still on his knees. "I've been thinking that I want her."

"I wouldn't," said Susy, very kindly, "if it can come to nothing. I'd try to give up wanting her".

He looked up at her as a man will look up to his queen if she will let him—if she is *good* in spite of manifest imperfections. Then he arose.

"I will try," he said. That was all. But it meant a great deal.

They came out of the wood again, and drove round to the little inn where there was already a trap in the stable yard which Susy recognised. Immediately after their arrival Jones emerged from a side door, wiping his lips. He cast no very pleasant glance on Susy and her companion, and seemed about to pass them without a greeting, when a change came over his face: some fresh plan evidently formed in his mind which involved speaking to them,

and he swaggered up with hand outstretched, a hail-fellow-well-met air about him, too suddenly assumed to appear natural.

"Fine day for the time o' year, Mrs. Branscombe. What's the prospects for the partridge breeding, sir?"

"I am going to see the gamekeeper now," said Hamilton civilly. "Mrs. Branscombe has been good enough to drive over with me." Then, turning to her, "Will you come to the cottage, or would you rather remain here?"

"Oh, I'll rest in the inn," said Susy, walking towards the side door. Hamilton went down the yard, and Jones was left planted there. His expression changed from forced good-nature to something quite different as he walked slowly after Susy. He caught her up as she entered the bar-palour, where the landlady sat talking to an extremely florid woman in a sort of magpie attire that proclaimed her a widow on the look out.

"This," he said, waving his hairy red hand with the diamond ring upon it from Susy to the stranger, "this is the future Mrs. Jones—Mrs. Branscombe."

"Excuse me rising," said the future Mrs. Jones. "Me other name's Wallerby—Mrs. Simon Wallerby. And there's nothing settled—though the way they talk about anybody that's under sixty in Market Yarborough almost forces you into a corner when you'd be wearing weepers still, if you followed your own inclinations. Only the other day a party came to me and said, 'Well, when am I to have my bit of bride's-cake?' 'Never,' I said, 'because if I ever do

there won't be any.' You take my meaning, Mrs. Branscombe, when I tell you my poor Simon only departed a year to-day, and Mr. Jones, kindly bringing me out to breathe the air and bear up, is the reason for me being on this chair in this bar. You may think — *well*, black and white and him only gone a year! but you can sorrow, my dear, as much under black with relief as black without—and it's a woman's first duty to cheer up those she's among and not be what Mr. Jones here calls a dash on the landscape."

"Blot," said Mr. Jones, as if he were calling names.

"And that's the reason, too, why you see us taking champagne in the daytime, a thing that's as all wrong as saying your prayers in the street, or going to a ball in your night-gown, if you'll excuse the expression, Mrs. Branscombe."

"Cham.," said Mr. Jones, "is a bucker-up against the universe. You can face anything on a bottle of cham."

"Even me!" said the widow archly, shaking a fat forefinger. "Oh, Mr. Jones, Mr. Jones, it's what my poor Simon always called the devil's milk."

Mr. Jones frowned, and the tactful landlady hastened to intervene.

"All to their own tastes," she observed. "It would be a queer thing if Mrs. Wallerby didn't hark back to the thoughts of him she lived with for so long."

"It would indeed," responded Mrs. Wallerby, wiping away a tear with a lilac-bordered handkerchief; "considering how he left me Full Control, and every

investment gilt-edged. A saint in heaven couldn't have done more."

Mr. Jones's brow cleared.

"No. Fine fellar, poor Wallerby. I should be the last to deny it. Splendid fellar."

"I understand, Mrs. Branscombe," said the tactful landlady, willing to give the conversation a less dangerous turn, "that you were Miss Drewery of Suddaby. I remember your father and mother slightly —they came here once when I was first married —and your aunt, Miss Dimsdale, too, greatly respected, I've always understood, by everybody that knows her."

The effect of this speech was volcanic. During the latter part of it Mrs. Wallerby was rising slowly, now she stood up and burst forth into such an eruption of words and tears and gasps, that the tactful landlady retreated to a distant corner with her best beer jug, not knowing what would happen next.

"So, Mr. Jones, this is that Susy Drewery as was!" cried the widow, with every bugle a-tremble, "so you decoy me here to your meeting-place with her you wanted and couldn't get—she flew for higher game than you, by all accounts—but you can't leave her alone for all that—"

"Stop," roared Jones. "I never knew she was coming. She's come with Mr. Hamilton. Go, look out there—you'll see his trap."

"All you want is my money," sobbed Mrs. Wallerby, unheeding, "though you did say I'd a figure like a p—partridge on the way here. I asked you if you'd got over your feelings for Miss Drewery—

I'd been told about that—and you said you had, but you never said she was m—married and coming here; else I'd sooner have tramped back barefoot, I would, than join in your horrid plans—I'd be as ashamed—"

Susy went forward and put a hand on the widow's shoulder.

"Stop," she interposed. "You must not talk like this, Mrs. Wallerby. It's pure nonsense, and insulting to me as well. Will you believe me when I tell you that I would never willingly see Mr. Jones again—that I'd like to live in a world where I *couldn't meet* him?"

Mrs. Wallerby uncovered one eye with which she glared at Susy.

"No," she said, "I know myself what a fascinating fellar Jones is—none better—and I know there's more in it than meets the eye. He's got a way with him," she retired again into her handkerchief, "that would melt a stone. I don't w—wonder you want him back?"

"Haven't I told you," said the exasperated Susy, "that I detest him—that I wouldn't have married him for any earthly consideration."

"Yes," assented Jones, "she said that at the time. I might have been a gorilla from the way she went on, and I wouldn't have her now," he added viciously, "for a million pounds."

The widow withdrew her handkerchief entirely.

"You'd do a lot for that, Jones," she said, shaking her head. "I know you."

Jones looked balefully at her, but held his peace; gilt-edged securities made a sacred halo round her bonnet.

"Quite a lover's quarrel, I declare," said the tactful landlady, emerging from her corner with a feeling that the storm was nearly over, and it was safe to venture into the open again. "It almost reminds me of my own courting days."

"Should ha' thought you'd have forgotten them by now," said Jones, gulping down the rest of the champagne. "Must be a good half-century ago—ha—ha!"

For a brief moment the landlady's colour rose, and she nearly ceased to be tactful. Then she recovered herself.

"Such a one for his joke," she smiled, addressing Mrs. Wallerby. "*You'll* never have cause to be dull."

Susy went to the door.

"Will you please tell Mr. Hamilton that I have walked up the road," she said. "He will overtake me on his way back to Saltmarsh."

The door closed on her, and the tactful landlady, Jones and the widow looked at each other.

"I'm afraid she's a thought flighty," sighed the landlady.

"She's in her right place, living at Saltmarsh House," said Jones, smarting from these last blows which Susy had given to his vanity. "It was built for a fancy lady—"

The landlady held up her hand.

"*Not* in my bar, please, Mr. Jones, whatever we may think in our own hearts—Mr. Hamilton is my landlord."

"And there's things we think but don't sully our lips with in the presence of mixed genders," continued the widow, who was far from calm yet.

"A fact I never had to remind my poor Simon of—never!"

"It's all been too much for her," purred the landlady, as she saw them into their trap. "The quiet and the fresh air on the way home'll soothe her nerves, poor dear. I know myself what it is to have a feeling heart; and you've made a lucky exchange, Mr. Jones. Lucky indeed. You might have been married to one quite unsuited to you by this time. Ah! it was *meant*, no doubt, that you and this good lady should come together."

"Providence works in a mysterious way," assented Mrs. Wallerby, still inclined to tears. "I've always felt that from my youth up. Here a sudden touch of gout to the heart—there a girl not knowing what's good for her—"

"You take my word," said the landlady earnestly, "no young woman in Miss Drewery's position, as she was then, would have refused Mr. Jones if she had been really asked. He's too chivalrous to say so, of course, but, you bet, he never actually came up to the scratch. Girls are always fancying men want to marry them."

"You must come and spend the day with us when we're settled," said Jones, with gratitude.

"If we ever are," added Mrs. Wallerby.

"Oh, you'll forgive him on the way home," said the landlady.

"I'm not sure," said the widow, irritated again by the sight of Susy in the distance, "that I want another woman's cast-offs."

Jones turned purple, and the veins in his forehead

swelled—he made as if to alight from the cart. Then he caught sight, in his mind's eye, of the gilt-edged halo round his companion's bonnet, and turned his wrath from her to that distant figure. If he had been angry with Susy before, he now hated her for the weapon she provided the widow with to scourge his vanity. And those words of Susy's "I'd like to live in a world where *I couldn't* meet him," rang still in his ears.

As they passed Susy she stood very still and stately on the grass by the roadside, her profile clear against the March sky. Her cool aloofness of bearing infuriated Jones still further—balked passion, jealousy and wounded vanity are very bad for the heart of any man, and this one had nothing to fight them with, so they overwhelmed the good things which were undoubtedly there too. He would have liked to flick Susy's calm face with his whip as he drove past her.

She had reached the outskirts of the next village by the time Hamilton caught her up: and a little wayside group stood watching with eager curiosity while she got into the trap beside the master of Saltmarsh, whom everybody talked about, because he imparted that tinge of romance to the plain annals of the countryside which no simple souls can help loving.

This romance, then, they felt, as they watched the couple drive away, had been properly cast. Hamilton and his fancy lady satisfied their imaginations. There was a physical glow and splendour about both which made the knot of villagers feel as if they

had been at a pageant; it was only afterwards that they looked down their noses and said: "Fie, for shame!"

Susy was uneasily conscious of their curiosity, and she suddenly felt she could bear the situation no longer. But poor Mark—she had not the heart to spoil everything for him after his struggles and hardships and humiliations had come to a peaceful end—she could not inflict through herself the last and worst blow of all—her courage failed her every time she thought of it, because the look his face would wear then rose before her too. And she never doubted her own power to live such scandals down—her high spirit was of a sort that does not see defeat.

The only person she would appeal to was Hamilton. She turned in her seat and glanced at his bold, clear-cut profile and strong figure—he could bear anything—she must tell him, and leave him to put the matter right.

"Mr Hamilton," she began nervously, "I—I'm afraid—"

When it came to the point she couldn't. How was it possible to tell a man whom you were growing to like and pity most deeply, and respect, such a thing as that?

"Yes," he said, turning to her.

"I'm rather afraid people don't understand about your giving us Saltmarsh," she hesitated. "They think it—funny. They think we've taken advantage—"

"Didn't we reason all that out before," he said,

"when I showed you that it was worth my while because you gave me what I wanted?"

"But people think—I believe they think you could have got all you wanted cheaper—they think there must be something more—more—"

She could not go on any further.

"What on earth does it matter what they think?" said Hamilton. He was so used to a buzz and comment about his doings that he had grown to heed it no more than a worldly-wise prince does the odd fables that gather round his name; and a royal disregard for the gossip of folk living between Saltmarsh and Suddaby was as natural to him as breathing.

"It must matter what people think that you're living amongst," said Susy, with a deeper wisdom still. "You may pretend it doesn't—but it does. If you don't mind what they think of you they leave you alone out of revenge—that's what happens."

"Do you object to standing alone—above them?" said Hamilton, with a grand air that made Susy ashamed to acknowledge:

"Yes, I do. I've begun to be alone a little. My old friends are not the same, and new ones look shy at me—it's a lonely thing leaving the station you were born to—as lonely as going away to another country."

"If it troubles you that there is a certain amount of gossip I will leave things in train for the gossip dying out," said Hamilton. "I'll think out a way; but you'll have to stand it for a time. You must look at it as your part of the payment; then you

won't feel under any obligation to me, and I know how you hate to feel that. Well, with every malicious thing that these people say, you're paying—don't you see?"

"If it were only myself," answered Susy, very gravely, "I should say that the price was too great—nothing is worth being talked about."

Hamilton looked down on her, very kind, but not really comprehending that Suddaby gossip *could* matter.

"But that's what everyone wants—to be talked about—for good or evil. What women dread now is to be left out. The idea that a woman's highest honour was to be passed in silence is as dead as the dodo."

Susy sat very erect, looking straight before her.

"The idea isn't dead, it lives in *me*," she said, with a pride quite equal to Hamilton's.

When she said that, the man beside her felt as if they took hands together on a common ground—aloof and apart. Every thought merged into one overwhelming regret that they two had not been able to stand so always, facing the world.

They were nearing home now, and the road where they were driving had hawthorn hedges so thick and high that anyone might walk behind without being seen, though the leaves were not yet out. Mark tramped along a furrow there, in his heavy boots, very tired and mud-stained. He worked much harder now than he ever had done during his term of employment at Saltmarsh in the past autumn, because he was determined to earn his day's food

and his night's lodging. That was how he began to look at it. All the rest belonged to his son, for whom the property was held in trust, but he would earn his own living—he would not be beholden to Hamilton for that.

He plodded along with bent head when the sound of wheels arrested his attention, and he glanced up at Susy and Hamilton. They both looked moved a little, wearing the unmistakable expression of stirred emotion, and their was a fitness about their being together that struck Mark uncomfortably. The thought that shot through his mind was—What a fine couple they made, and how little they seemed to need anyone else.

He suddenly felt very tired and unhappy, not definitely angry or jealous, but like a boy who sees two companions go off gaily without wanting him. He felt he was of no account to anybody, and that is a sign always for the wolf to howl drearily outside the House of Life. What's the good of it all? nobody cares—nobody cares.

Everybody hears that sometimes, from the first moment they begin to think nothing will stop them hearing it.

The sound of the wheels grew fainter, but Mark did not call out or make himself seen—something seemed to hold him back—the sort of odd shyness that falls upon the third person, however legitimate their place.

At the door of Saltmarsh House, Hamilton helped Susy to alight from the dog-cart, and he again felt, as they stood together for a moment on the doorstep

how splendidly they might have spent life together.

She caught his gaze fixed on her, and moved away from his side with a conscious flush for fear anyone should see them standing so, and make some remark upon it.

But he had really forgotten for the moment that there was any gossip; it seemed of so absolutely little account to him. And his whole nature was stirred by Susy's little flush and conscious droop of the lids. He construed them to mean that he could have made her love him if he had come in time.

CHAPTER XIX

THE first of April was so warm that Miss Dimsdale could not get her dinner in peace because of the run upon halfpenny boxes of lemon kali after morning school. The season of peppermints seemed to be definitely over, and she handed over the very last box of kali with a moist brow and a feeling that summer was coming. Then, towards evening, there was a brisk demand for little tin cases of "The Smoker's Friend," coloured sugar pellets to perfume the breath, for the youth of Suddaby inclined to thoughts of love, which is not an abstract emotion in in those parts.

So at closing time Miss Dimsdale locked the shop door, fatigued but satisfied, for she liked to feel herself tired with work as all good north country women do. Then she began to think about love as well. It is such a mistake to suppose that women cease to think about love when they cease to want it. The blood stirs in old veins like sap in a weathered tree at the call of spring, though the only result is a clearer sight than usual of what they imagine might have been. There's a pleasant group of admirers who would have come forward, but—in every old maid's heart; and they have grown quite as good as the real thing with keeping.

Jim Pyne had been one of those whom Miss Dimsdale always thought she might have married, but—and when he took a wife elsewhere she felt that the designing minx had caught him. Now the poor woman was long in her grave Miss Dimsdale saw in it the hand of an over-ruling Providence. She might have died of pneumonia, too, if she had been Mrs. Jim Pyne, but she had been mercifully preserved, and was thankful. For the light of an absolute belief kept the wolf-cry far from Miss Dimsdale's little House of Life, though some poor, bitter ones in a place like hers hear nothing else, until they take to drugs or drink or melancholia.

Even an ignorant and rather superstitious faith like Miss Dimsdale's is a marvellous thing—worth more than any gift of fortune. A lonely woman cannot keep really sane in a *dark* House of Life, she is so much afraid.

What's the good? She is alone—alone. She must see the picture of a God who cares, or people the darkness with unnamed devils, because love is a necessity of her being.

However, Miss Dimsdale sat down to her late supper of bread and cheese and tea with a tremendous certainty that life was worth living and heaven worth gaining at the end of it—a very rich woman. She was drinking the last black cupful with plenty of sugar and the cream off her ha'poth of milk when there came a knock at the door facing the garden.

"It's me," said Jim Pyne, before she could unfasten the wooden bar. "Just got back from market—must have a word with you!"

She saw when he entered that he looked flushed and excited, and the recollection of that "but" stirred in her mind. Had he come to invite her to be the second Mrs. Pyne? Had he taken a glass too much? Should she allow him to sit down?

These questions flew through her brain while she said, "How do you do!"

The third was answered at once by Jim Pyne's taking a seat uninvited and mopping his brow.

"Warm day for the time of year," he said.

"Did you get me to unlock the house to tell me that?" said Miss Dimsdale, leaning towards suspicion number two. He must have had an extra glass at the "Dog and Duck."

"Miss Dimsdale," pursued Jim Pyne, "I've come to you because you're the one person in the world that I can say what I've got to say to—there's nobody else living"—he broke off, greatly agitated.

Suspicion number one—he'd come to propose! Years ago she had decided what she should say in refusing a suitor—she got it out of a magazine.

"I shall be glad to be a sister to you," she said, folding her hands—this was really a good ending to a good day—"but nothing more near and dear. If you'd asked me before you took on with your first—" she concluded, relapsing into the vernacular.

Jim Pyne stared at her like a fascinated frog.

"W—what are you driving at?" he stammered. "Perhaps you're overset with the sudden heat."

"You've asked me to marry you and I've refused," said Miss Dimadale tartly; "and now I think you'd better go home to sleep off that extra quart of beer."

He rose from his chair, bent on flight. She was evidently wandering, but his kind heart refused to allow him to leave a poor fellow-creature in a state of delirium, so he skirted gingerly round by the table to the tap, fearing least Miss Dimsdale should embrace him, and drew a cup of cold water which he threw over her from behind as a restorative. Most of it soaked into her cap, but what was over trickled down her face and ears; she faced Jim Pyne with little rills running beside her nose, and wisps of grey hair hanging limp over eyes that emitted sparks.

"Go," she said, pointing dramatically to the door. "Go, drunkard, and never darken these premises again!"

"Oh, I'll go," said Jim Pyne, almost equally roused; "but whether you're mad, or I'm drunk, or what's happened, I don't know. I came here on an errand of kindness—"

"Kindness!" shrieked Miss Dimsdale. "I don't want you. I wouldn't marry the best man living—let alone *you!*"

"Nor I wouldn't ask you," retorted Jim, stung to uncomplimentary candour. "You're too sharp for a wife. I'd sooner have old Belle Parsons that takes in washing. I only wanted to speak to you about Mrs. Branscombe, and there's nobody I would talk her over with but you. I'm too fond of her to go gossiping round to other folks about her and her doings, though things do seem a bit odd."

"Sit down. "'Scuse me a minute," said Miss Dimsdale faintly. Then she went upstairs and put

on a fresh cap, returning her militant self again in five minutes.

"Now, what's this about Susy?" she said, entering with rather a bluster. "I know folks think that Hamilton must be going dotty already to settle so much on their bairn, and they hint that Susy and Mark's taken advantage of him; but anybody who knows Mr. Hamilton knows he'll do as he likes and not as other people want him to; he's a will like iron up to now, anyway, whatever he may be like when he gets old. So if it's one of those old tales you've come to tell you may keep your mouth shut."

Her hair was still damp and most uncomfortable, and her vanity smarting.

"It's worse than that," said Jim Pyne, in a low tone. "I don't like to repeat it, but Jones was giving it out for truth at the 'Dog and Duck,' and so was the widow he's going to marry. Jones just stopped to leave some sale bills on the way back to Market Yarborough."

"Ah, there'd have been no talk if Susy had had him," sighed Miss Dimsdale, who still saw in Jones a most desirable relative. "Not that she hasn't done better as things turn out. But what was Jones saying? He can't get over it, poor man."

"He said," responded Jim Pyne, in a half-whisper, "that Susy is Mr. Hamilton's"—he paused—"Mr. Hamilton's fancy lady. That — that explains everything—"

Miss Dimsdale's old cheeks went red, then very grey.

"The coward!" she cried, "the coward! To blacken Susy because he couldn't have her."

"Somebody must speak to Mark," said Jim Pyne. "I wouldn't have it get to Susy's ears for a fortune, but somebody must tell Mark."

Miss Dimsdale did not reply, but sat in an attitude of deep concentration. The lights and shadows cast by the lamp showed the power in that shrewd face—a woman who might have controlled great destinies—the energy and intelligence which had never allowed her to get stranded most evident in every feature. At last, after a long pause, during which Jim Pyne gazed anxiously across at her, she spoke slowly:

"Mr. Hamilton leaves England five weeks from now—he's never coming back. He'll be gone for good. And there isn't an atom of truth in the slander to give it a hold. Anyway you can't better it. What's said is said. You can't take it back. All you can do is to play into Jones's hand and make Mark give up all his fine prospects for the sake of a bit of gossip that'll die out a deal sooner if they're rich than if they're poor. Jones is sharp—but so am I. You said that yourself just now."

"No offence," mumbled Jim Pyne, embarrassed.

"So I'm going to play my hand too," continued Miss Dimsdale. "I'm going to do my best to prevent Mark and Susy from getting to know about a foolish talk that might ruin their boy's prospects as well as their own. It isn't only them you've got to think of, it's the boy."

"But there's nothing," answered Jim Pyne, "that

matters to a man when his wife is spoken of lightly—you're a woman and, of course, you don't understand—but there *is* nothing."

All the sentiment, which is so much stronger in the man than in the woman, spoke through Jim Pyne as he said that—he just spoke for all his sex. And Miss Dimsdale answered for hers in her reply.

"You must just shut your eyes to that, and remember how their prosperity in life, and their children's chances for the future depend on their not knowing; don't you see?"

"No," said Jim Pyne, rising and dragging the door open rather violently, "I don't. I can't pretend I do. If a man speaks lightly of your wife you've got to knock him down if you pull the world about your ears with doing it, and bury your children under the ruins. You've *got* to—even if there's no truth in what's said—you've simply *got* to."

"Then, are you going to take the responsibility of turning Mark Branscombe out into the world again, without a home or an occupation?" asked Miss Dimsdale. "Shall you be ready to answer for all that follows if you go and tell him?"

Jim Pyne glanced out of the open door across the dark to the vague shadow of the clustered houses and the lights shining out from upper chambers. It seemed very hard to decide, and yet, at the bottom of his heart, he felt that to a friend of Mark's there was only one way. He must tell.

"Look here," he said, "it's no use your talking about a thing you can't understand. You're not a

man though you are so sharp. Only a man could. I *must* tell him."

"Jim Pyne," responded Miss Dimsdale impressively, "you and me's been friends for a vast of years, but we shan't be any longer if you do my niece such an injury as that. And for what? To let a man she wouldn't have, see his malice satisfied. I don't exactly blame Jones, because I daresay he sees things in that light; but I want to best him."

"I want to give him a black eye," said Jim Pyne, ruffling his white hair ferociously.

"You couldn't," said Miss Dimsdale, calm and practical. It was easy to see how Ada Drewery, who so resembled her, was worth almost anything to Messrs. Parkinson & Diver. "You couldn't hurt him, though he might half kill you. But the question is —are they my relations or yours? Have I the best right to know what is for their advantage, or have you?"

"Come to that—" hesitated Jim Pyne.

"Well," continued Miss Dimsdale; "then when I ask you as a personal favour to leave matters alone, will you?"

Jim Pyne grasped his forehead and stared into the pleasant dark where the stars were already shining. The path of duty had been confused by a woman's tongue—not for the first time—and he really did not know what to do. It had all been as plain as plain when he walked angrily up the road from the "Dog and Duck."

"Tell you what," he said at last, "I'll leave it this way. If I happen to run across Mark I'll mention

the matter to him—if I don't, I won't—I'll take it as a sign I'd better not. How will that do?"

"Silly rubbish," responded Miss Dimsdale. "Can't you make up your mind?"

"Yes," said Jim Pyne. "I can; easy. But it won't be as you want. I'll either do that or yoke out and drive down to Saltmarsh to-morrow morning."

Very well, we must leave it to chance, then," said Miss Dimsdale.

"I'm not leaving it to chance, I'm leaving it to *Fate*," answered Jim Pyne solemnly. "Good-night, Miss Dimsdale." Then he suddenly remembered the misunderstanding about his matrimonial intentions, and added with a nervous cough, "No offence meant, none taken, I trust? I'm what you call a confirmed widower, else there's nobody I'd sooner take up with, I'm sure."

"I'm much obliged," said Miss Dimsdale, closing the door with pardonable violence.

It was a fine night, and Jim Pyne met several people as he went down the village street, but he had nothing to say to them. At last, however, one of those people who will talk under any difficulties turned back with him, and they were just passing the 'Dog and Duck" together when a horseman rode by so swiftly that they could not see who he was, but their faces were flecked with foam from the animal's mouth, and the tall figure and big black mare could only belong to one person.

"Hamilton," Jim Pyne said, in a low tone, feeling almost as if some uncanny horseman out of the past

had ridden by. "Looks as if he was riding from the devil."

"To it, more like," said the countryman, with a chuckle. "To it," he repeated, as his friend made no response.

Jim Pyne stood in the middle of the road and scratched his head.

"You never know," he said. "Well, so long. I must be getting in."

The man tramped off into the gloom, but Jim Pyne did not go in after all; he stood and looked up the long road that led to Saltmarsh.

"Well," he sighed at last, "you never know. Flee from temptation—that's plain enough. Perhaps that's what he was doing—or maybe he's never given her a thought that way. She never has him, I'll bet a million pounds. It's a rum world—not that I ain't satisfied with it." He drew a long breath. "My, if I'd got Ann Dimsdale! I've a deal to be thankful for." And in that frame he said his prayers and went to bed.

He was fast asleep by the time Hamilton reached Saltmarsh, where the house lay mostly in darkness, and Mark and Susy were asleep too. Their chamber window shone blank in the starlight.

He took his horse round to the stable, where a sleepy lad unharnessed it. There was a very quiet, starry sky overhead and a ground-swell on the sea that made the waves draw back from the shore with a most melancholy cadence. The night wind from the shore flapped the draggled creeper round the satyr as Hamilton went through the garden, and

the wolf-cry that he had been riding hard to escape from sounded very clear.

For there is no time in all the day or night when the wolf howls so despairingly as when a man looks up into a crowded, starlit sky. He is crushed by the thought of a million worlds, with him an atom in one of the least of them. What *is* the good of the poor, short hopes and fears that can be pressed into a throb in the ceaseless heart-beat of eternity?

Astronomy is a science to make a man an apostle or an atheist.

Hamilton stood listening to the wolf-cry for a time, and it filled all his thoughts so full that there was room for nothing else, then he came slowly to the door and turned the handle, but it would not open. So he went round to the front, and found that locked as well. He carried no latch-key, because there was no latch to the door, only a bar and a large lock, and it became clear that he was fastened out.

He looked up at the window where the blank panes glistened in the starlight, and behind which Susy lay asleep, and turned back into the garden again, where he stood by the satyr, considering and watching the quiet house.

This was how it would all look, year after year, when he was hundreds of miles away from England. The salt smell would be the same, the rustle of creepers round the stucco figure, the swish of the sand-grass on the sandy soil.

He felt as a man might feel who could see forward into the time when he was dead and forgotten.

It came to him, standing there, that he could not

go and leave it all before he must—like an irresistible flood from somewhere outside himself came the conviction that it was impossible for him to go and leave the home and the woman he loved for another man. He wondered how he had ever thought of doing so, and realised that the idea was bred of the loneliness which leaves room for eccentric fancies to expand, and of the fear that nurtures them.

He saw things just as they were for one brief moment, as he stood watching that quiet house in the starlight.

He had given away Saltmarsh as a boy leaving school divides his pencils and tops, or as a man doomed to die sometimes gives away at the last some treasures that he won't want with him in the Grown-up Land beyond. Now he wanted them back as the boy might by the middle of the holidays —or the man might, if he found he was going to live after all.

Hamilton no longer wished beyond all things to guard himself from an ignoble age; what had been the motive power of his life from boyhood took no longer the first place, and he was left in a way helpless —driven now by something else over which he was losing hold. His love for Susy was becoming what nothing in himself had ever been before—stronger than his own will.

He thought of his adopted son, George Hamilton, with a bitter scorn and anger. What a fool he had been to play at being father as a child plays with a doll's house—how could he have done that too?

The answer stirred in the bottom of his heart, but

did not form words. Vaguely, without knowing, he had wanted to make believe that he was the father of Susy's boy—he had grasped the shadow because he could not have the substance, in the silly way that men and women do when emotion makes them children.

How utterly futile and foolish it all seemed as he paced up and down, glancing every now and then at the house where a light or two still burned below. Evidently the hall lamp had been left alight with a view to his return, and the door locked by accident; but his sense of exclusion was none the less real.

Why hadn't he married and chanced the result?

The answer was there in words this time.

Because his love for a woman had never been stronger than his own will.

He still walked—up and down—up and down—bound to keep moving to ease the oppression of his mind; but he was very tired, and his thoughts ceased to be consecutive. Isolated pictures instead began to come and go of themselves, all bearing on the same point.

Susy's face when the doctor's wife came up to her in the garden; Susy when Jones accosted her in the inn yard; Susy a hundred times during the past week, with that conscious flush on her cheeks, and the shyness in her candid eyes. And this happened only when she was with him.

A conviction began to form out of these pictures that made him stand still—a black figure against the starlit sea behind, his gaze fixed upon the quiet house.

He could still make her love him—that was what it amounted to—the chance was still his to take.

He remembered so clearly how something in their natures, in their very outside appearance even, fitted together with a dignity and appropriateness that seem to mark them out as mates. The worn-out phrase, "They were meant for each other," became new and alive, as such sayings do, when they strike home.

That was a living truth—they were made for each other—no one had any right to interfere with Nature's plan.

How foolish seemed those considerations which had held him back, in this new light. What were they? Less than nothing.

The terrible insistence of the *Now* which claims the present generation forced Hamilton past this conclusion; a line from Omar Khayyam drifted across his mind, following the homely phrase, "They were meant for each other." It formulated all these drifting pictures and thoughts for him, as it has done for so many another—this Bible of despair—

> "Scared by some after-reckoning ta'en on trust."

He wasn't going to be that—he wasn't going to be that:

> "Ah, take the cash, and let the credit go."

He threw his head back and laughed, as the woman in the portrait had done, just before she died.

There was life in that sentence—spring—reality. No maudlin regret or faint, sentimental hope.

The dawn wind touched his flushed cheek with a tingling coolness, and he began to walk again; he shivered a little, in spite of the fire of his own thoughts, as the breeze gathered force and blew cold from the leaden sea. The stars went in and it was very dark, but he scarcely noticed that in the intoxication of his dreams.

Susy and he! How they'd face heaven, hell, eternity!

A faint radiance began to quiver on the far edge of the sea, distant, impalpable; only a promise of light; but it grew and strengthened until the whole expanse was silvery calm, a few white gulls brooding over it.

Something in the calm and the freshness quieted him; they reminded him so of Susy, and yet placed him apart from her so that he could see her life from a distance, get it into focus again.

He had only thought of himself in relation to her all night, but with the morning he began to think of her alone.

If he made her love him, and come to him, as he fancied he could—how would it be with her?

When he thought that, he held a match to that extinguished lamp in his House of Life; it struggled, died down again into darkness, feebly flickered into a little flame.

He had laughed once when Mark said that the flame might be lighted again through love for a woman; but he had long forgotten. Now Mark's words were being fulfilled through his own wife.

Hamilton stood very still as the sea turned from silver to a dull reflection of the splendour above. The level country stretched for miles around, cold, still and colourless, under the cloud and clear shining of an English sunrise.

Susy believed in that "after-reckoning;" she believed in heaven, and was happy in her faith. She thought she loved her husband, and was happy in her love.

Would she be as happy when he had torn all that to pieces and put himself in its place? For his innate arrogance did not permit him to doubt his power to do so.

Then, as he pondered, the sun burst through the clouds, a thrush near by sang out in an ecstasy of joy. The stirred deeps of his remembrance brought still another buried phrase to the surface:

"Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord."

The smoke began to arise from the chimneys of the village, then from his own house. The world was awake.

He looked at the church tower, the squat dissenting chapel, the roofs beneath which men and women were arising to the work of another day, and he loved Susy now as a man loves his wife, not his mistress, and also as a parent loves his child, to the extent of wanting her to have every chance in earth and heaven.

He could not spoil any chance of Susy's now, because he loved her more than he wanted her.

As Hamilton went indoors to bed the wolf-cry followed him, of course, for the plains of the future

looked so blank and desolate. "I came like water, and like wind I go." Those words swept back to him across the desert space—What was the good?

But inside his House of Life the feeblest flame burnt up.

CHAPTER XX

WE often hear that nothing is too great for love to do, but the ultimate test lies in the fact that nothing is too small. It's fine, of course, for a man to ride forth against all comers with his lady's glove in his helmet, but it's finer still if he remembers to stop up the draught in the castle casement for her when he gets back — it means more.

So Hamilton's decision to leave Susy's pathway unhindered was not made less worthy, nor were his emotions of that night under the stars rendered less real by his reflections over the late breakfast-table next morning, though these did relate to an invitation to the Hospital Ball at Market Yarborough. For his desire now was to leave Susy in the position he thought most suited to her. She was never meant for anything hovering or doubtful, and yet she had not the remotest trace of that social ingenuity which enables many women to create for themselves a secure platform far above the ground on which they grew. He did not realise that Susy would never occupy a platform at all, being in this sense one of those free women who walk the common earth of grass and flowers where they played as children; being born one of Nature's princesses, she

naturally never dreamed of trying to be even a true princess of another sort.

But Hamilton thought she might like to put on the ermine and crown of a world's princess for a change sometimes, because he had lived all his life with women to whom such garments were either a necessity or a goal; and he was going to provide her with them if he could. He began to be ashamed now of having bargained for her child in exchange for Saltmarsh, and only the fact of such a thing being impossible prevented his giving up all claims on young George Hamilton. He knew, however, that he could now give his old home to Susy and Mark under no other conditions; still it was wonderful how the aspect of it all had changed. Susy herself filled the place that had been crowded by a thousand wild desires and shadowed by a haunting fear; his satisfaction in having her son to bear his name and follow him paled into the reflection of a desire that had no chance of coming true. He saw that scheme for the mirage that it was, but he wanted to make it seem real now to the rest of the world, for Susy's sake.

So when Mrs. Walker came round to see if he would take tickets for a large hospital ball to be held at Market Yarborough, he not only agreed to do so, but also went further.

"Are you going?" he asked. "Because in that case I think I might go too. It'll be my last dance before the deluge."

"How can you speak of it like that?" cried Mrs. Walker, clasping her cotton-gloved hands. A sort of

inward thrill at being exposed to the fire of a bold man's admiration, without scorching the guardian angel wings which she felt upon her shoulders, gave an intense interest now to every trivial meeting she had with Hamilton. He had known so well how to leave that impression. "I am hoping to attend the ball," she continued, "if Dr. Walker doesn't want the horse that night; of course my jaunts all depend upon his patients."

"If you will do me the honour of accompanying me, I will send for my motor from town. I don't keep it here, because it doesn't belong, somehow, to Saltmarsh, and a man is buying it from me when I leave England; but I'll have it over if you will come."

Mrs. Walker flushed—unfortunately her nose was more sensitive than her cheeks and flushed most—and she gazed at the uncompromising toes of her boots with a delightful embarrassment. The portrait of the Bishop of Mandalay in an open locket upon her chest heaved tumultuously, and no wonder.

"I—I don't know," she murmured, "if it would be the correct thing. Dr. Walker may probably be detained—there are several unexpected—that is expected arrivals—what I mean to say is, he may be quite suddenly and unavoidably detained."

"I understand," said Hamilton, without the suspicion of a smile.

"And it would hardly do for me to motor over to Market Yarborough alone with you, would it?" went on Mrs. Walker, gaining confidence. "You see I'm not exactly old."

She glanced up at him with what youth remained in her from beneath her heavy eyebrows; she was thoroughly enjoying herself.

"People are very censorious," said Hamilton gravely, "but it seems a pity to forego this pleasure simply on that account if it would be a pleasure to you?"

"I should enjoy it immensely," declared Mrs. Walker. She sat biting her lips and thinking, feeling she was in a romantic situation; she always afterwards looked back on Hamilton as Her Romance. "I've got an idea!" she exclaimed finally. "Why not ask little Mrs. Branscombe to go with us and act chaperon? Of course she'll know nobody, but she's quite respectable, and it would be a tremendous treat for her. I can no doubt find somebody to talk to her."

Susy—quite respectable! Hamilton's eyes flashed, but he controlled himself.

"That might do," he said, not too enthusiastically. "But perhaps we'd better take Mark Branscombe too. Then they can look after each other."

"Oh, he must go," said Mrs. Walker hastily. "There's been enough gossip already. Ah, Mr Hamilton, you did not realise what a censorious world would say when you adopted that child; though, of course, anyone who knows you as I do can see that a rustic beauty without manner or intelligence is not likely to appeal to your cultivated taste. She struck me as being so particularly raw," added the doctor's wife, with a tingling recollection of their first call.

Hamilton had just been about to feel ashamed of making such a fool of the woman, but this speech removed his faint scruples.

"You know my taste," he said, with meaning, "is for a matured character, a woman who can help and guide. You do know that, don't you? I feel I can leave these young people in my old home with the confident assurance that you will allow no one to slander them, for the sake of my adopted son."

"Anything I can ever do for—for either George Hamilton," said Mrs. Walker, rising to go.

The elder George Hamilton saw her off at the gate, and then went back into the long room. After a while Susy came in to sit by the window with a pile of socks. The light fell very pleasantly on her candid face and brown hair, the needle going in and out in a sort of peaceful rhythm that set the tune for the watcher's drifting thoughts. He felt rather mean now as he remembered Mrs. Walker; but he said to himself that he would do worse things than that to give Susy a moment's happiness. Still, he did feel rather small as he sat and looked at Susy's quiet profile silhouetted against the glass with the sea and sky beyond.

"Mrs. Branscombe," he said, breaking the silence at last. "I've a great wish to take you and Mark to the Market Yarborough Hospital Ball. Will you come? I think, you see, that it will give Mark a chance of meeting all those people on the right footing, and he'll have to meet them now he is going to live here."

"Oh, I'd rather not," said Susy, flushing as she

thought of the gossip about Hamilton and herself. "I'd much, much rather not."

But, of course, she promised in the end to go—who could refuse a man anything in reason when he was leaving for the rest of his life in three week's time? Certainly not Susy.

On the Wednesday Mark went to market as usual, and he saw in the distance Jim Pyne's battered old brown hat amongst the little crowd outside the "White Horse." He waved his whip in passing, but Jim was engrossed in a fervid discussion about the Education Act and did not see him—so close did Mark pass by the danger of hearing what might alter his whole existence.

On the way down the street he passed a draper's shop in which silks were displayed for the coming summer season, and he saw a green one rather like that which he gave to Susy in the days that seemed so far off now: all the charm and freshness and tenderness of that time came back to him as he stood once more in the street considering whether he should buy a green silk gown as a present for Susy. But she was his wife now, nearer, and yet much further away than she had been then. The little barrier had grown, as such do, until they could not see each other's hearts over it; they could only guess, and perhaps guess wrongly. It grows so very easily—that barrier—but it's as hard to destroy as the walls of Jerusalem.

Mark vaguely hoped to make a breach with a gift that would remind Susy just as it had reminded him, and he brought the silk away in a parcel,

wrapped in the same coloured paper, with all the dim jealousies and resentments of the present almost forgotten—he was again a young lover, and she the Princess of Furbelows for whom he was buying a silk gown.

He drove home, whistling as he went, and at the railway crossing of the station nearest Saltmarsh, a porter ran out to say there were a couple of parcels for him—would he take them?

They turned out to be really for Susy and Hamilton, but it was all the same, and he went off with them under the seat, whistling still. At the house the parcels were taken in while Mark was in the stable looking at a mare; but he kept the green silk to carry to Susy himself, and ran gaily with it to their own little sitting-room, where she was minding the child during the nurse's tea-time.

But the cardboard box from London which had come in the dog-cart was already unfastened, and a frothing bouquet of filmy stuff like green cobwebs appeared inside.

"What is it?" asked Mark curiously.

Susy drew a long breath.

"It's just the most lovely dress you ever saw in all your life," she said. "Cousin Ada's sent it, and there's a receipted bill made out to her enclosed, but no letter. It's most mysterious—the gown's cost forty pounds, and yet it is paid for. Do you suppose she had the bill put in for a sort of joke, and that it is a present from her? She does get things much cheaper, you know."

Mark suddenly remembered seeing a letter addressed to Miss Ada Drewery in Hamilton's writing on the bureau when he went to fetch a bill for some oats—the solution flashed across him.

"Hamilton's ordered it," he said. A great bitterness against the man who had given him everything filled his mind, because the same hand gave everything to Susy too—left nothing at all for a poor beggar like him to give. He no more doubted his wife than he did the rise of the sun each morning, but he hated the thought that all the good things she had in life came straight from another man.

Susy stared in surprise for a moment at Mark's suggestion.

"Oh, I don't think it's Mr. Hamilton," she began hastily; then she broke off. After all, it was like him to give her what she wanted and to keep from her any sense of obligation. He evidently wanted her to suppose that it came from her cousin Ada, but there was too much of Aunt Dimsdale about that lady for her to accept gratitude under false pretences.

Mark turned round with his parcel towards the door, but baby's eyes followed him as much as to say, "Aren't you going to have a word with me, old chap?" and he went back again to speak to the boy who loved the bright colouring and pleasant smile of his young father.

"What's that?" said Susy, touching the parcel as he bent over the child on her knee.

"Nothing," said Mark shortly.

"Why, it's from the draper's," said Susy, looking at the label. "I wonder what it can be." She sat, frowning in earnest consideration; then the sort of intuition which women have told what it was. "Mark!" she exclaimed, "it's some stuff for an evening dress that you've bought for me in Market Yarborough—I know it is. Here, take baby."

She pushed the child into his arms, and he stood, rather shame-faced and sullen, while she unrolled the green silk.

"Dear boy," she said, "it's nearly like that other—long time ago. How sweet of you to bring me it."

But everything was spoilt to poor disappointed Mark, so he only said gruffly:

"Is it like the other one I gave you? I didn't know. I took the first that came. The woman in the shop recommended this—of course you won't need it now."

The worried expression on Susy's face gave place to a slow illumination.

"Oh, yes, I shall," she said at last. "I shall want it to wear at the ball."

"You've got this," he said, kicking the cardboard box. "It's a much finer gown than you could ever make yourself."

"I shall not wear it," said Susy.

"Why?" asked Mark sharply. "If it's because Hamilton's paid for it, that's all nonsense, you know—one thing more—after all he's done—we can't begin to haggle about that."

Mark spoke sharply because he was torn by the same conflicting feelings of resentment and gratitude

that had been making a battle ground of him for weeks past; and he was always ashamed when resentment got the upper hand.

"That gown from Parkinson & Diver's won't suit me—I should look a perfect guy in it; I saw that directly I opened the box," said Susy, who, like most truthful people, lied too circumstantially. "Besides, it would tear, and there's too much lace on the bodice."

"You're just saying that," answered Mark, only half convinced.

"I shall send it back to Cousin Ada and tell her it's all wrong," said Susy.

"I wouldn't do that," said Mark.

"Well, don't mention the subject to Mr. Hamilton," said Susy. "We won't assume he knows anything about it—that's the least we can do."

So Mark went down into the long room where Hamilton was unfastening his parcel, and, feeling conscious, made some forced remark about the piles of new French novels on the floor.

"Fresh consignment?" he said. "Some of the pictures on the covers look—strong."

"You're quite right, Branscombe," said Hamilton thoughtfully; "they're not fit to bring into the house with your wife."

"Oh, I didn't mean that," said Mark, with his ready flush. "She needn't see them, and I'm not strict myself. I don't think it matters what you read, you know."

That was Hamilton's own literary creed, expressed to Mark a hundred times—but for the first time it

sounded false. A man who loved Susy should not dishonour her sex by enjoying the imaginary spectacle of a woman degraded to such hideous uses as the heroines of such novels were put to—such books were the poor prostitutes of romance ministering to the lower nature of those who read them.

"I've come to the conclusion," said Hamilton, tearing off the objectionable cover and putting it into the fire, "that I made a mistake. Something—an experience I had—has made me see that it does matter what you read; fragments come back at a crisis to strengthen or weaken you. I'm sure of that."

"Odd—you thinking so differently from what you did," said Mark; "but I'm afraid you can't convert me."

"I did convert you," said Hamilton, speaking with an embarrassment and difficulty quite strange in him. "You used to think as I do now until you came to me and I argued it out with you."

"P'raps so," said Mark indifferently. "Anyway you can't change me back again."

Then he went out and left Hamilton confronted for the first time with that terrible spectre which rises out of the past of every man who causes another to offend. He saw it, because there was a little light in his House of Life, and this strange spectre is only visible in the light.

. . . . . .

On the evening of the ball, Mrs. Walker, with the miniature of the Bishop of Mandalay on her chest as a sort of talisman, emerged from her room and said

farewell to Dr. Walker, who was unable to accompany her.

"Always happens so," she said; "I never can think why the Saltmarsh babies must always choose a flower-show day, or Christmas Eve, or some occasion like that to come on."

"Worse for me if they didn't come at all," said Dr. Walker, who was a philosopher. "Well, dance away and have a good time, dear. You look a great swell in that dress."

"Oh, I don't aim at that," said Mrs. Walker, "but I do flatter myself that nobody could mistake me for anything but a lady."

The maid-servant put her head in at this juncture, and spoke to the doctor.

"There's tailor Marshall getting frantic, sir," she said; "he's kicked the cat twice, and him such a good-hearted man. Shall I tell him you're ready?"

"Will you never learn to come inside the room when you wish to deliver a message," said Mrs. Walker, in an awful tone.

"Please, 'm, there seems so much of me," whimpered the new importation.

"Help me on with my cloak," said Mrs. Walker, with an air of giving her up.

"Oh, how beautiful you do look, 'm," said the new maid.

Mrs. Walker pretended not to hear, but she felt the compliment to be an involuntary tribute to the white gown, which was one of those garments that seem to have too little stuff in them everywhere, and

give the wearer the odd look of a needy scamp in an overcoat buttoned over nothing.

A few moments later a motor car stopped before the door, and Hamilton came in to fetch his guest. She met him with outstretched hand and a deep look of sentimental meaning, and she saw herself, in her mind's eye, filling the double rôles of the Good Woman and the Heroine of Romance—the sort of romance that country ladies weep over from the dress circle of a London theatre, and afterwards call a little unpleasant, but true of the upper classes no doubt.

Hamilton's appearance was certainly suited to his part of the performance, but his manner was disappointingly blank; after all, he thought, it was poor game to bamboozle this silly woman into giving countenance to Susy—there was something about it that he began to dislike.

"I'm afraid we shall be rather late," he said. "Are you quite ready to start?

And he led the way to the car without another word.

But Mrs. Walker thought to herself, "What noble chivalry—he finds me alone in my own house, and will not presume—that's the sort of influence a good woman may have, even on a man with a reputation like Mr. Hamilton's." She beamed on Susy and Mark as she entered the car, with radiating patronage, and after a few remarks about the weather devoted herself to the further improvement of her host's character.

She saw with satisfaction, by the light of the lamp, that Susy's hair was parted and turned back over her

wide brow as simply as ever, and that her green silk gown flowed around her with a plainness unrelieved by so much as a touch of black velvet—Mrs. Walker was great on knots and tassels of black velvet—finally, that she was pale and nervous. There was something in Susy that roused every antagonistic feeling in Mrs. Walker, a sort of generous warmth that the other woman could never meet without wanting to freeze; she constantly felt that Susy was common, a word often on her lips, and more often still in her mind. She glanced from her own neat chest to the pretty curves beneath the green gown, and thanked Heaven for her refinement of contour.

Before they reached Market Yarborough Hamilton's reserve became apparent to her, and jealousy stirred faintly. She began to remember Mrs. Bateson's stories again, and to wonder if she were wise in making a public entry into the ball-room with these people. Hamilton remained in his place as the bold man whom her good influence made meek, but she was not sure about the strength of it when she was out of the way.

One often heard of such cases—a man was denied the good woman he could have worshipped, and went to those who were more easily attainable. She sighed again with pleasantly-soothed vanity as she alighted from the car, but decided, if possible, to join some other friends in the dressing-room, and to be detained by them while Susy and Mark went in. Hamilton would no doubt wait for her.

She was fortunate in meeting several women she

knew who crowded round the mirrors and powdered their noses, or not, according to their principles—ladies of solid worth and social ambition used no powder—while Susy stood with every appearance of dignity in her silk gown, that spread in full, simple folds about her. She was one of those women who have a natural opulence of bearing; it would be difficult to make her look really poor; but she was inwardly very nervous and uneasy, feeling that the whole roomful knew those shameful tales, and being almost sure she heard the words, "Fancy lady," above the hum, though no one spoke them.

"Are you coming?" she asked Mrs. Walker at last.

The friends with that lady looked surprised, and she hastened to reply:

"Er—no. Please go on;" then, before Susy was out of earshot, "Patients of my husband—you know what a doctor's wife has to bear in that way," and she patted her black hair, frizzled high over a cushion.

"Poor dear," sympathised the other ladies.

When Susy reached the vestibule she found Mark and Hamilton waiting for her.

"Where's Mrs. Walker?" asked her husband.

"She asked me to go on. She is talking to some friends," said Susy.

Hamilton saw the situation at once, and his eyes flashed, but he said quietly enough:

"Let us go now, she will no doubt follow with her friends when she is ready."

But as he walked beside Susy through the broad entrance into the room he could not help smiling;

this, then, was what you got for squeezing cotton gloves—it didn't pay, his teeth were on edge at the recollection of them.

At the far end of the hall were two gilt arm-chairs upon which sat the Mayoress and the wife of the Lord-Lieutenant of the county, Lady John Palmer; the Mayor, in his third year of office, stood with the ease of one accustomed to honours on Lady John's right.

Suddenly his flow of polite conversation failed, and he broke off in galvanised astonishment.

"Is it—do my eyes deceive me?" he gasped, "or is that the young man I was instrumental in removing from our ancient Grammar School?"

And the Mayoress, regardless of etiquette, leaned across her august companion, who would one day be a duchess, and replied:

"It's that Mark Branscombe, sure as I'm a living soul."

Lord John strolled up at that moment.

"My dear," he said to his wife, "here's Hamilton with those people he's adopted, I'm told. Pretty woman, isn't she? I think I shall go up and get an introduction. Would you like to speak to her?"

Lady John dropped her eyes, and was about to refuse, when the Mayor broke in:

"Lord John, as one family man to another, I think I ought to inform you that things have been said which make it undesirable for Mrs. Branscombe to know our wives. The husband's a bad lot, too—we all know that—"

"Do we?" said Lady John sharply. "That's just

the point. My sympathies were with him at the time, I remember."

"I think you've forgotten, my dear," said Lord John, a rising politician, "that the Mayor's son was —was the victim of Mr. Branscombe's temper."

"Sorry," said Lady John briefly, "but Mr. Hamilton is an old friend of mine, and he is going away to Canada in a fortnight, so I must say good-bye to him."

With that she arose and sailed down the room.

"My dear," said Lord John, following her, "you really mustn't do like this if I'm to get in again at the next election. The Mayor has tremendous influence, and he hates these people."

"Now, John," said his lady, "I've worked like a navvy at bazaar openings and stone-layings, and every sort of bore you can think of, but I'm going to have my fling for once, or I shall hit that woman. I've felt it coming on a long time. She calls me 'my dear' now, and holds my arm in public, and that I bear for your sake; but I'm going to give her one in the eye to-night."

Lady John was more direct than careful in her speech, and Mrs. Walker would have called her common if she had not been going to be a duchess.

"Well, have your own way," said Lord John. "I must confess I'd believe anything of Hamilton; he's always been such a queer chap."

"So would you be queer if you had madness *hanging* over you," said Lady John, very flushed and

beautiful. "I've always pitied him from the bottom of my heart."

"You'd have done more than pity if he had asked you, I believe," said Lord John, half in jest, half ruefully.

Lady John looked at him straight in the face.

"Yes, I would," she said, "but that was at eighteen, before I met you; and I'm so grateful to him for the way he behaved then that I won't turn my back on him now, and I will say good-bye. He's always had the elements of nobility in him. I was a great match, you know, for a plain Mr. Hamilton, and he liked me anyway. I think he could have loved me if he had let himself go; and I loved him. Now, you know. I've often wanted you to know, John."

Lord John put his arm on his wife's arm as if to guide her through the crowd.

"Come, Margaret," he said, "we'll ask them to join us at supper. A man who might have had you and has missed you, should have everything we can do for him."

After Hamilton had introduced the Branscombes to Lady John, she turned to Susy and said:

"I hear you are to be our neighbours at Saltmarsh after Mr. Hamilton has gone."

"Yes; we shall be there with our son, whom Mr. Hamilton has adopted," said Susy.

Then Lord John began to talk to her and Mark, while Lady John drew Hamilton a little aside.

"We're at the Park now," she said, "and I want you to come and see us before you go."

"You're very good," answered Hamilton, remem-

bering, too, how he had almost loved her. "But I can't go round saying 'Good-bye.' It's more than any mortal could stand, and I can't do it. I feel like a condemned man as it is."

"Are you sure it's worth while?" asked Lady John, very softly.

"No," said Hamilton, with a smile that she always remembered when she thought of him, "I'm not—but I'm going all the same."

"Well, leave me something to do for you, George, something hard," she pleaded.

He looked at her and saw she meant it.

"Something really hard?" he asked gravely.

"Yes," she answered, with her kind, straight look.

"Then be good to the Branscombes—and don't misunderstand."

"I couldn't," she said, "because I know."

Then he remembered, too, that she had loved him.

"I'm beginning to think," he said, "that the world is full of good women."

Lady John glanced at Susy.

"Because you've found one?" she said. "Ah, that's the only way a man can learn it."

The band struck up a medley from the *New Puritans* for a set of Lancers, and Lady John put her hand on Hamilton's arm.

"You'll dance this with me, and John will ask Mrs. Branscombe," she said. "Perhaps Mr. Branscombe wouldn't mind taking my sister? That will be very nice—quite a family party. John, tell Sir Arthur to join us with his partner, and then we shall be all right."

She walked beside Susy up the room, talking pleasantly of the weather and the gowns of the dancers.

"How lovely your dress is!" she remarked.

"I made it myself," said Susy, with that queer pride of hers all up in arms. "I was the village dressmaker at Suddaby, you know."

"Oh, yes, I know that," said Lady John, quite unexpectedly, "but you must be an artist as well." She glanced round. "I think they are waiting for us. John, will you and Mrs. Branscombe stand opposite?"

Both Susy and Mark danced badly; there was no doubt of that; but the others were not disconcerted by their mistakes, and from the gallery, where spectators sat at a shilling a head to view the ball, everything seemed to go right. Mrs. Farrow, who was spending the night with her sister, followed every movement with eyes that were nearly starting from her head.

"Now she's talking to Lord John—now she's crossing hands with Lady John—now she's setting to corners with Sir Arthur Banks!" gasped Mrs. Farrow. "I declare I have to keep a grip on this merino she made me to make it seem real—I should think it was a topsy-turvy dream else. Susy Drewery standing up to dance with Lady John. Oh, if Miss Dimsdale was only here."

"That green silk of Mrs. Branscombe's is nothing," sneered the sister. "Not a bit of style about it. It does look queer among all the ruffles and flounces being so plain."

"Always her fault," said Mrs. Farrow. "Why, she wouldn't trim this merino as I wanted it—made me go without an extra flounce. But to think of her at eighteenpence a day. I say, there's Jones with his widow in the next row; wonder what he thinks of it?"

"He looks as if he was going to have some kind of fit," said the sister, surveying Jones's purple neck. Then she gazed at Susy once more. "Well, talk about the wicked flourishing—"

"Who's wicked?" demanded Mrs. Farrow sharply. "Not Mrs. Branscombe, I'm sure."

"What does it look like?" said the sister, who cherished disappointed social aspirations. "I was talking to the Mayoress the other day, and you should have heard her tale. Disgraceful!"

The music ceased and Lady John drew Susy to a seat beside her with marked friendliness.

"There!" exclaimed Mrs. Farrow, "would she do that if there were anything in it?"

The sister was nonplussed but oracular.

"You never know," she replied darkly. "Still waters run deep. All is not gold that glitters."

"A stitch in time saves nine," snapped Mrs. Farrow.

"What do you mean?" asked the sister.

"I mean you're talking nonsense," Mrs. Farrow retorted, and a silence fell between the two ladies which lasted until the beginning of the next dance.

"Wonder what Mark Branscombe feels like," said the sister then, no longer able to restrain herself.

Mrs. Farrow looked at Mark's radiant, boyish face.

"He's feeling at the top," she said, with a smile. "He always is either at the top or at the bottom, is Mark Branscombe. He looks to-night as if he could jump over the moon."

"Well, he is jumping over a good lot when you come to think of it," responded the sister. "But you bet the Mayor's conscience won't let him vote with Lord John after this. He was on the waver. The Mayoress and me were talking about it only the other day."

"Miss Dimsdale says his is the sort of conscience that's to be seen, not heard," said Mrs. Farrow.

"Of course it's all very well for you to look up to Lord John, living in the country," said the sister, begging the question, "but in the town we're beginning to find out that one man's as good as another."

"Miss Dimsdale—" began Mrs. Farrow, ready with another quotation from that astute lady.

"Who's Miss Dimsdale, I should like to know?" said the sister. "Keeps a little village general shop."

"But you said just now we were all equal," persisted Mrs. Farrow.

"So we are with those above us, not with those below us," replied the sister. "I suppose you'll make out I'm no better than my little nursemaid next."

"N—no," said Mrs. Farrow, snubbed, but sure there was a retort that Miss Dimsdale would have been able to find. "Why, there's Mrs. Dr. Walker

going up to Susy now, grinning all over her face, and dressed in white, too. I do hate to see an old ewe dressed lamb fashion."

"Old!" exclaimed the sister. "She's not a day over forty—you're *that* out of date, Sarah."

CHAPTER XXI

NOW Susy was nothing more than the average good woman; but in spite of a convention, which assumes nowadays that every wife only awaits the chance to respond to "Nature" and love somebody not her husband, the bald truth remains that the average good woman no more contemplates unfaithfulness than she does stealing her neighbour's spoons, or felling her charwoman with a broom handle. It no more comes within the range of her possibilities than forging a cheque does within the range of the average decent man.

Such things do happen, of course, but they are abnormal; the strange, sad exception, not the general rule.

And Susy knew herself to be so absolutely outside of any such thoughts of Hamilton, that it never occurred to her for one moment that Mark could doubt her.

She wanted to keep the gossip from him, because she thought he was happy at Saltmarsh, and had found a safe refuge there after all his troubles, and she knew he would never keep it at any cost to her good name; but she never dreamed he could believe that she cared for Hamilton.

She forgot that he must feel the barrier which her

wounded pride had raised between them, and which grew higher and higher, built on only a thousand unconsidered trifles, as such barriers do; she never realised that he might imagine Hamilton the direct cause of that barrier, instead of the indirect one. The possibility of the *tertium quid* was not among the clean thoughts she had brought from the little room behind the shop—such arrangements were very plainly labelled about Suddaby—and Susy felt herself as much removed from women of that sort as she did from the poor things who were being taken handcuffed to the county jail. She was sorry for them, but she never thought of saying, "There, but for the grace of God, goes Susy Branscombe," because it's a thought that never truly does come to such as her—an untouched faith in her own purity prevented the slightest fear. That's how most decent married women do feel: not like cattle awaiting the call of another mate as the neurotic novelist would have us believe.

So Susy watched Mark go off to Suddaby on business the day after the ball without the very least idea of what might come into his mind if anyone should repeat the scandal to him about herself and Hamilton. For one thing, she believed it to have blown over—her reception at the ball the evening before, where everyone had followed Lady John's lead, naturally gave rise to that idea—and anyway it seemed no longer of such great importance; but she never in her most apprehensive moments had imagined that her husband could think there was any truth in it.

Mark was still in the splendid spirits which he, too, had brought home from the ball. Everything in life spread out before him as he drove along, covered with the golden haze through which he saw realities when all went well. The only drawback was, that when the golden haze disappeared everything grew so insupportably drab. However, he was, as Mrs. Farrow said, ready to jump over the moon this morning. Every hedgerow was in bud, and every bank sweet with primroses—the smell of primroses warmed by the sun is enough to make anyone jump over the moon—and a lark rose out of a ploughed field and sang right up into the sunlight, taking Mark's thoughts with it.

That's the sort of exhilaration which raises you to the door of heaven and leaves you there, if you believe in heaven.

The long road gleamed white in front of him between the springing emerald grass, and the air was full of golden, dancing light—white and emerald and gold—no wonder he felt like a king as he drove into the yard of the "Dog and Duck" and called for the ostler.

He went into the bar wanting to treat somebody—that was how Mark always felt when he was happy himself—and he was delighted to see Jim Pyne sitting in an arm-chair by the window.

"Well, Jim," he said heartily, "this is luck, didn't think to find you in a public-house at this time of the day. Ha, ha!"

He felt so jolly he could laugh at anything.

But Jim Pyne's behaviour was most oddly un-

responsive. His long upper lip was drawn down his little blue eyes were set and miserable.

"It had to be," he said, in a deep voice.

"What on earth are you talking about?" asked Mark, astounded.

"I told Miss Dimsdale I'd leave it to Fate, and Fate's done it," answered Jim Pyne. "'If it's *meant* it will be,' I said to myself, and it's been."

Mark's jolly face grew longer. He thought poor Jim's mind was becoming dulled, as is the case with old country labourers sometimes. The glorious sense of everything being splendid grew less vivid.

"Been working out in the sun, old chap?" he said anxiously.

Jim got up and put a gnarled hand on the table.

"I'm not touched by the sun, if that's what you mean," he said. Then, as Mark's glance involuntarily strayed to the empty glass, "No, nor I haven't been drinking either. Mark Branscombe—I—I don't know how to put it—but folks is talking about your wife and Hamilton, and you ought to know."

Mark stood like one paralysed for a whole minute—a very long time to stand so—the clock heavily ticked the seconds, and with each second some picture passed through his mind of Susy and Hamilton together. Never for one breath of a thought did he doubt her faithfulness, but he began to wonder if she cared. What was the reason of the estrangement which had grown up between them? He had imagined it was about the boy altogether; but might it be partly that she no longer cared? Hamilton had wanted the boy, and so she first

turned to him—away from Mark. Had she stayed turned?

The last picture which came with the last tick before he spoke was that of Susy and Hamilton driving together while he tramped behind the hedge. He remembered how finely they matched each other, and how left out he felt. He was left out. They'd got everything in life without him. He had nothing in the world to give Susy but his love, and he had seen lately she didn't want that.

"What do they say?" he asked, in a husky voice, coughing nervously.

Jim Pyne squared himself. He hated this more than anything he had ever confronted before, so he was more sure than ever it must be a sacred duty.

"They say she's—she's Hamilton's fancy lady. That he has you all there because of her," answered Jim. "Miss Dimsdale doesn't understand—women don't—but a man knows you've got to knock anybody down who says that in a public market. It wasn't fair not to tell you."

"You know it's a lie," said Mark, very quiet and white.

"Yes; I know. But you've got to make Jones own the lie in the same place he told it—the yard of the 'White Horse.'"

"Jones!" shouted Mark, going purple-red. Then he glanced at the clock. "It's market day; if I start now I shall catch him going in to the Market Ordinary. My trap's here."

"I'll go with you," said Jim, following him. "I

aren't dressed up, but I'll go with you and see you through."

The cart swayed as Mark went round sharp corners, and the mare was in a lather, froth hanging to her mouth.

"Don't make a lot of talk about your wife," said Jim, with an anxious face. "You can't *talk* about a thing like this."

"I'm not going to talk," said Mark heavily. "I'm going to do."

They drew near to the town and the lash of his whip came loose as he sat with his head down, half stupidly brooding. The sting on his cheek brought a queer light into his eyes; he took the whip out of the socket and felt it over carefully. The painful purple-red again coloured his face and neck, and his hands trembled as he put the whip back into the socket.

At the bottom of the hill leading into Market Yarborough he fell in with a drove of sheep on their way from the auction; the cattle sale was over evidently, and Jones would be on his way to the "White Horse" for dinner.

Mark whipped up the tired mare and clattered down the High Street without responding to any greetings from the farmers going to their dinner Mr. Farrow stood still, red-faced and indignant, staring after him.

"Drunk! At one o'clock in the day! This comes of getting what you haven't earned. Can't carry corn, Mark can't—too fly-be-sky. Better for him if he'd gone on hoeing fields and h'owing money He, he!" said the ever facetious farmer.

"Drop that 'r else we shall drop you," said his companions. "Don't you know it brings on some complaint, being as funny as you are, Farrow."

They just turned into the yard of the "White Horse" as Mark came down from stabling his mare. Jones stood in the midst of a little group of farmers, and the sound of his strident voice was followed by a chorus of wheezy laughter from fat men in tight, drab overcoats. Mark stood unperceived on the outskirts of the group. Jones was telling a story.

"So I said: 'Did you think you were bidding for an elephant, Mr. Brown, because this happens to be—'"

"You're a liar!" cried Mark suddenly.

There was an instant's dead silence, then Jones forced his way through to Mark in spite of the burly figure interposing.

"What do you mean?" he said. "Have you gone cracked like your master?"

"You're a liar! and you've got to own you are before you leave this yard," said Mark aggressively his whip quivering in his hand.

"Get out of my road," shouted Jones, walking straight on towards the door of the inn.

"Not till you own you're a mean liar," said Mark.

The men round looked in surprise at his bloodshot eyes and congested face.

"Come, Branscombe," said Mr. Farrow, "come into the house and have it out with Jones in private —you don't want to make a row."

"Yes, I do," roared Mark, "he's got to own he's a liar in the place he lied, or take the consequences."

"But you haven't told him what he lied about," urged Mr. Farrow. "He doesn't know for the life of him; do you, Jones?"

"If he means," said Jones slowly, beside himself with rage, "some remarks I let fall about his wife and Hamilton, I'm ready to stand by them." The men round cried: "Hush, shut up!" but he took no notice of that, nor of Mark's face. "It isn't my fault that Mrs. Branscombe's occupying her present position in Hamilton's house. *I'm* not doing the convenient husband, thank— A—ah!"

The whip whistled, and a long, red scar was left on Jones's cheek before he could seize the handle. The two men were about equally matched in strength, and wrestled fiercely and silently for possession of the whip until the onlookers dragged them apart. Then they stood panting, each surrounded by a knot of fresh-faced, perturbed men like a couple of fighting dogs.

"What have they fallen out about?" asked several.

"Jones has been slandering his wife," answered Farrow. "Wanted her himself."

"Can't stop folks' mouths with a horsewhip," said a third. "Folks will talk."

"Let 'em," was the general opinion; but Jones's voice above the turmoil demanding instant release in the tone he used to keep order among the dealers was no longer to be ignored.

"Let me go," he bellowed, "let me go. I will fight him if he isn't too big a coward to fight back. No man shall horsewhip me without paying for it."

"Have the law of him," said a Jones partisan. "That's the way I should do. Make him pay damages."

But Jones was a better man than that, for all his blustering.

"Damages! I'll knock the life out of him. I don't want any other damages than I can get for myself, if you'll let me be. No man's a right to stop me."

"Ay, that's true enough," said Jim Pyne, who up to now had stood silent and shaky, but determined. "It's a deal cleaner to wrestle a thing out with fists and have done with it than to drag it through the muck of the police courts with judges cracking jokes and papers making game of you, and every bit of a secret you've ever had torn out of your inside before you know where you are. Let 'em fight and get mauled, and shake hands when all's over, say I."

The farmers glanced at each other, half-convinced. It was in their blood to fight their own private battles, and leave the State to fight the general enemy, and their sluggish pulses quickened. After all, it was good for once to fight with braver weapons than the tongue and pen. The grasp on Jones's arm grew looser, and he strained forward. Mark had freed himself from Mr. Farrow's hand, and dragged the man on his other side towards the centre of the yard. The other farmers stood round in a circle; the red face of the "White Horse" landlord, careful for his license, peered anxiously from behind.

"Stop, gentlemen, stop!" he cried. "I shall be obliged to send for the police."

"No, no, let 'em have it out," roared the farmers, in a hoarse chorus.

"If you don't," said Jones, growing strangely purple about the neck and face, "I shall horsewhip Branscombe wherever and whenever I meet him." He stared fixedly at Mark—"Wherever and whenever —wherever and whenever—"

His voice grew thicker and huskier, until it ceased suddenly. He fell like a log upon the cobbled yard, and a dozen hands tried to lift him from the ground. Dr. Walker, who chanced to be lunching at the inn, ran out.

"Stand away," he commanded, unfastening Jones's collar.

"Is it a fit?" asked the scared bystanders.

"It's the hand of God," said Jim Pyne, in a quavering voice, with great solemnity.

"Nonsense," said Dr. Walker testily. It was hard that he could not even eat his lunch without somebody wanting him, and he had left a splendid sirloin such as Mrs. Walker never provided. "Hand of God, indeed! It's too much beef and whisky, with too much excitement on the top of it. He'll soon be all right. What's happened? How did he get this scar?"

There was a silence. At last the little man who had suggested damages piped perkily:

"Mr. Branscombe did it with a horsewhip. Shame! I'd county court him."

"They were going to have a fair fight," said Jim Pyne, "and square the matter up. It was a—a personal affair."

"Oh, well, leave him alone for a few minutes and send him home in a cab," said Dr. Walker, as Jones came back to consciousness. "He must on no account have further excitement, though, or I won't answer for the consequences. Get out of sight, please, Branscombe, if you are likely to disturb him. You don't want to kill the man, I presume. Now, Mr. Jones, feeling yourself again now, are you?"

Jones gazed round, and finally realised he was on the ground.

"Am I beaten? Did Branscombe knock me down?" he asked feebly.

"No—no," soothed Dr. Walker. "You'd just had a little difference, and were disputing about it, and you fell."

Jones turned a disgusted eye on him.

"Disputing!" he said. Then he turned to Mr. Farrow, as one responsible man to another: "What happened after we began to fight?"

"You didn't fight—it's quite true what Dr. Walker says," answered Farrow. "You were just going to fight when you were taken bad."

"Where's Branscombe? Did he funk it?" demanded Jones, sitting up.

"No, he was as ready as you were," answered all the other men.

"Now, Mr. Jones," said Dr. Walker, with authority, "if you don't keep quiet and calm yourself, I won't be answerable for the consequences. Nobody doubts your readiness to fight—nobody doubts Mr. Branscombe's—honour is satisfied. And here is your cab. Go home, take nothing but soda water, and see your

own doctor this evening. Then you'll be none the worse."

"I'm going to stop and have it out with Branscombe now," said Jones, struggling to his feet, and feeling the scar on his cheek.

"Branscombe's gone," said Dr. Walker; "and unless you want to be seriously ill you must do as you're told."

"Go and get the widow to kiss it better—he, he!" said Mr. Farrow, striving to "carry it off" with a joke, and meaning no malice.

He was both injured and surprised at Jones's reply.

"Home," said Dr. Walker, shutting the cab door; "and drive slowly, please. Good-day."

Then he went off to finish his interrupted sirloin. But it was not to be. Mark stopped him in the passage as he went through, and he gave up the sirloin for good and all."

"Well," he said, "are you going to have luncheon?"

"No," said Mark. "How is the fellow now?"

"Oh, he'll be all right. You needn't worry yourself. By the way, how did he get that scar?"

"With my horsewhip," said Mark grimly.

"Oh, he'd been—gossiping—I presume," said Walker, looking out of the window.

Mark flashed round upon him, but he plainly meant no offence—Mark's head dropped—all the pride and spring seemed to go out of his figure.

"Then you knew, too?" he said. "It seems everybody knew but me."

With a sudden flash: "I wonder if Susy knows?" he thought.

"You mustn't mind the vulgar gossip that goes about a country neighbourhood," said Walker lamely. "'Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow,' you know—all that sort of thing. Nobody escapes."

"And I thought we were doing so well. It seemed such a splendid thing. And all the time— Walker, why didn't you tell me?"

"We're not such old friends—I couldn't venture," mumbled poor Walker, distressed at Mark's look. "Oh, don't take it like this, my dear chap. Remember how Lady John quite made a friend of your wife—and how Mrs. Walker likes her—and —and— Bless my soul, if I took notice of all that's said about me!"

But Mark did not hear a word.

"You might have told me—just one honest, decent man to another. You'd no business to let me go on in such a position—unless you thought I knew what people were saying," he added sharply.

"Of course I knew you didn't, my dear fellow," answered Dr. Walker. "But it's an unusual situation—people were bound to say something—you must just live it down. Most men would be very glad to step into your shoes."

"No man—no decent man ever took anything at the expense of his wife's good name," said Mark bitterly.

"Who was fool enough to tell you?" cried Walker, as the door opened, and the fumes of roast sirloin wafted by.

"A friend—the only one I've got, it seems," said poor Mark, going heavily towards the door. "I must

be off now. I lamed my horse coming, so I've got to go by train and walk from the station."

"I'm just going too," said Dr. Walker; "drive with me. My trap'll be ready in five minutes."

"No, thank you," said Mark. "I'd rather have the walk. Would you mind giving Jim Pyne a lift?"

So Dr. Walker got a cut of the sirloin after all, with a clear conscience, and Mark sat huddled in a corner of the third-class carriage hoping no one he knew would come in. But he had to endure the curious looks of two farmers' wives who whispered together with mysterious nods and pauses. They were only discussing the iniquities of a neighbour who churned after dinner, and left too much milk in her butter, but of course Mark thought they were talking of him and Susy and Hamilton. He was glad to get out at the little station and avoid the stationmaster's greeting; he went across the road and struck into the river path that led all the way from Suddaby to Saltmarsh. There was nobody in sight there, and he had the willows and the brown water and the young grass by the water's edge, all to himself, beneath a grey sky. The sun had gone in as it does often towards the end of a spring afternoon, and the country was very fresh; grey-green and quiet instead of gold-emerald and splendid like the morning. He felt physically sick and done as he tramped along the footpath; all his pleasant sureness was broken down, and he saw himself viewed in the degrading light of a "convenient husband" by his little world—which is the only world that matters.

And at the back of this—less poignant but grievous

all the same—was the regret that he must give up Saltmarsh and the secure prosperity of an ordered existence. He'd no taste for high adventure and the chances of life—a hundred generations of solid, toilful men behind him prevented that—and he loved rural solidity, the tending of his own soil and what fed on it, the real possessions of a countryman.

But the bitterest thought he kept down, for it would have meant despair.

Only when he came in sight of the square house at Saltmarsh it would take language, and when he walked down the garden to see Hamilton and Susy seated together it shrieked at him, "You're not wanted!"

Susy sat in the sun mending a sock of Hamilton's—Mark could see it was his because of the glint of silk between fine woven wool—and Hamilton was in a chair opposite with his eyes bent on her flying needle. The baby lay asleep in a basket cradle near at hand. The elder George Hamilton, and the younger, and Susy.

"Well, Mark, back again!" said she brightly, looking up from her mending.

Though the sun had gone in, the world was really still gold-emerald and splendid to her. No one could think that Lady John would consort with a fancy lady—she was vindicated in the eyes of Market Yarborough and Suddaby—*her* little world that mattered. And she was ready to throw down the invisible barrier between her and Mark. After all, dear fellow, he had acted for the best, and anyone could see how he loved baby now. Susy had stopped

on that road which was leading her apart from everyone, and smiled back with baby in her heart upon a friendly world that afternoon.

"I'm going in," said Mark briefly.

Susy jumped up, and followed him into the long room where the portrait was.

"Well?" she said anxiously. "What is it, Mark? What's happened now?"

The "*now*" showed that she was getting used to life.

"Susy," said Mark, turning on her, "did you know?"

"Know what?" she faltered, but she had no need to ask.

"That my wife is taken for a—for a light woman. That I'm supposed to take Saltmarsh as my payment."

"Oh, Mark, don't speak like that! I knew, but you've had so many troubles—I didn't want you to lose all your security and happiness because of a little slander. It's that housekeeper, Mrs. Bateson, who has spread the report. I wasn't going to let her ruin your life."

Susy was a Dimsdale in spirit as she said that—one of those tough north country women, like Miss Dimsdale and cousin Ada, who could grasp *things* through the obscuring veil of sentiment. A man always has so much more sentiment than a woman; which is why he writes all the great poems and the finest music, while she really governs the world.

"I'm going to tell Hamilton that our bargain's off," said Mark. "I could no more take Saltmarsh for

our boy now than I could cut your throat. It's become impossible."

"Oh, I was afraid of this; that's why I wouldn't tell you," said Susy. "I don't care for myself—you know that—I could live on dry bread and water myself; but it's you, Mark, after all your struggles—I shall never forget your poor hands when you first came home."

Mark stretched them out.

"My hands!" he said. "What's that? They were clean. They wouldn't be if I stayed here after this."

Susy sat with her face in her hands.

"I see what you mean," she said, raising her head. "But you can't tell Mr. Hamilton to-night; he's spending the night with the Palmers — don't you remember? They persuaded him to go in the end. There—that's the sound of the wheels passing."

"You don't want me to tell him," said Mark, looking down at her.

'Oh, I don't know—I don't know," answered Susy.

CHAPTER XXII

MARK went and locked himself into the harness-room; he felt as if his world were turning round him, and he must hide away.

By that time Hamilton's motor had reached Suddaby on the way to The Park, and Jim Pyne stood by the gate of the little shop, saying a last word to Miss Dimsdale who stood at the door.

"It's done, I tell you," said Jim testily. "And what's done can't be undone. I did no more than my duty."

"Duty!" cried Miss Dimsdale, wringing her hands. "You're one of them who'd set gunpowder to the world in the name of duty. You only think of satisfying your own nasty little conscience, and you don't care what happens. What'll your duty look like when you see Mark and Susy grubbing along on seventeen shillings a week, and you remember you took Saltmarsh from them — when you see their children ill and puny for want of proper food, and Susy worked into an old woman before she's thirty years old, and Mark a hang-dog labourer. What'll your duty look like then?"

"Same as it does now," said Jim sturdily, though his face grew whiter and more tired than ever. "'Tisn't your business to think what's going to

follow; you've got to do the right thing and let the future alone."

"How are you going to *know* what's the right thing?" cried Miss Dimsdale. "You're not the Almighty."

"Maybe not, but I left it to Providence, and Providence brought me up against Mark Branscombe at the 'Dog and Duck'; I couldn't do fairer than that. I was led."

"With a glass of beer at the end of your nose," retorted Miss Dimsdale.

"I needn't have come and told you at all," said Jim, nettled. "I did it out of kindness, so's you should be prepared. I'll wish you good-evening. Well—what's the—?"

For Miss Dimsdale ran out into the road, shrieking and waving her hands at the passing motor like a maniac.

Hamilton stopped at once, or he must have run over the dishevelled figure on the road.

"Miss Dimsdale!" he exclaimed, staring at the grey locks floating from beneath a rakish cap, so unlike the wearer's usual severe tidiness. "What is the matter?"

"Can you come in a minute?" said Miss Dimsdale, panting, with her hand to her side.

Hamilton went into the little parlour behind the shop preceded by Miss Dimsdale, and followed by Jim Pyne.

"Well," he said, looking from one to the other.

"Mr. Hamilton—this—silly old fool's—gone and told him," she gasped, still out of breath.

"Told who — what?" asked the astonished Hamilton.

"Jim Pyne's told Mark Branscombe that people call Susy your fancy lady."

Hamilton did not speak for a moment. He glanced towards Jim Pyne, seeming to tower over the two in that little room.

"So you've thought it worth while to carry a dirty tale like that to Mr. Branscombe. Why, don't you know, I heed it no more—Mrs. Branscombe heeds it no more—than the foul oath a drunken wench throws after you at a street corner? And you've degraded yourself to be the bearer of such filth." He paused, turning full on Jim Pyne. "Did you believe it?"

"No," said Jim sturdily; "but I thought it my duty. I wouldn't let my wife take anything at the cost of her good name, and I gave Mark credit for the same feeling."

"Who cares for the silly gossip of a few villagers?" said Hamilton. "You've lived in this small world until you can't see how little that matters, Jim Pyne —less than the crows chattering in the trees."

"Maybe you've lived in a big one, Mr. Hamilton, till you can't see no clearer than I do. Maybe I think it matters too much, but you're wrong too in thinking it doesn't matter at all. Where you live —that's your world—continents and oceans is less to you than the corner of the street and the duck-pond by the chapel if you live near them. And all those who've known Susy since she was a little lass began to speak lightly of her—that couldn't go on. I'm fond of Susy."

"And why didn't *you* tell Mark, if he had to be told?" said Hamilton, turning to Miss Dimsdale.

The spirit that might have ruled anything—the wide, keen outlook that a lifetime of Suddaby could not dull—gleamed out of Miss Dimsdale's answer.

"I just weighed one thing with another and saw what was going to *last*," she said. "Saltmarsh was—the talk wasn't—not with you going away next week. I'd rather they'd had it without any talk, but you've mostly got to eat your bit of dirt with your dinner though you mayn't see it; that's how I felt. If there'd been a shade of anything wrong—but there wasn't."

"Well, perhaps it's best Mr. Branscombe should know," said Hamilton. "I understand how you felt, Pyne, and I respect you for it. There's a lot of chivalry left in the world yet."

"Quite so," said Jim non-committal. He had not the slightest idea what Hamilton was driving at.

"After all, there's no reason for us to trouble ourselves further, Miss Dimsdale," Hamilton continued. "There was bound to be a little gossip about an unusual proceeding, but I've been gossiped about all my life. I never notice it."

But Miss Dimsdale unexpectedly veered round It was one thing for her to say 'take no notice,' it was quite another to see him calmly doing it.

"My niece isn't used to it, though," she said, with dignity, "and I never thought to hear her name coupled with a gentleman that's been talked about as you have. I'd advise her never to speak to you again if I thought it would do any good—but it

won't. And she'll live it all down better with Saltmarsh at her back than without it. Now you see what I mean."

He was altogether too unimpressed and high-handed for Miss Dimsdale.

"Certainly," he said absently, frowning in deep thought. "How did Mark take it?" he asked suddenly.

"Fought Jones in the 'White Horse' yard," said Miss Dimsdale, as much as to say, 'there's one for you!'

She was satisfied at the result.

"And Mrs. Branscombe's name was mentioned?" he demanded.

"Everybody knew!" flung out Miss Dimsdale.

Then Hamilton left the house with a curt "Good-night," and turned his motor back towards Saltmarsh.

"Wasn't going to let him whiz away believing he was such a duke it didn't matter what common folks like us thought," said Miss Dimsdale, with her cap still on one side, gazing after the lessening cloud of dust.

"I'll go home," said Jim heavily.

"'Bout time you did!" responded Miss Dimsdale.

It was dark when Hamilton got back to Saltmarsh, and Susy sat alone in the long room doing nothing. A piece of work lay in her lap, but the needle had fallen from her fingers. The blind was still up, so that she could faintly see if anyone came from the harness-room across the garden.

"Mr. Hamilton!" she cried, starting up as he

walked into the room. "What's brought you back again?"

"I wanted to see Mark on a matter of business," said Hamilton, quietly enough. "Nothing to worry about. I'll just go and look for him. I suppose he is outside."

"He's in the harness room," said Susy, standing up very tall and fine with her brown silk sweeping round her. "Mr. Hamilton—you know!"

He felt, oddly enough, as if he were accused of something and found guilty.

"Know what?" he asked, though he understood quite well what she meant.

"That Mark has heard and is going to give it all up—he couldn't keep Saltmarsh after what's been said. But it's all so hard—and so muddled. Poor Mark."

"What about me?" cried Hamilton, coming up beside her, and he stood with her on the hearth beneath the picture, so that they made from the outside a most noble picture themselves, between lamplight and firelight. Mark paused for a second as he passed through the garden, watching them, and the sight of how they fitted together, and both fitted that square dignified house, went home to him like a fresh blow upon a stricken heart.

"What about me?" repeated Hamilton. "Have you no pity for me? Is it nothing to you to throw back in my face all I've had such joy in giving you? Ah! Mark'll have *you;* he can't be poor. It's I, poor beggar, who can buy everything but what I want. A starved wretch with a big banking account; it's a worse irony than that of Tantalus."

She had never seen him so unmanned, and with an instinctive sense of covering his weakness she went to draw down the blind. Just then Mark crossed the top of the sand-hill, and was silhouetted dimly against the sea and sky.

"Look," she said, "there's Mark going on to the sand-hills. You can catch him up if you want to speak to him now. He has his gun with him. I wonder what he can be going to shoot at this time of the year."

A most strange look came over Hamilton's face, and he sat down with his back to the window.

"Oh, I daresay he's going to pot a few gulls, they steal the seed; we were only talking of that yesterday."

His voice was wonderfully even, but conveyed the idea that he himself did not hear what he was saying.

"But it's so dark, he can't see them," said Susy, puzzled, but not uneasy yet.

"Oh, it's the close season. He hopes to get a shot at the light birds in the dusk without anyone being the wiser," answered Hamilton, still with that odd air of listening for something a long way off. "Let's" —his voice changed—"let's talk about ourselves—just you and me. It's nearly the end, Susy, it'll be good-bye very, very soon. Do you—Susy—do you think you could have been happy with me here always?"

"Yes," said Susy vaguely. "Oh, Mr. Hamilton, I feel somehow uneasy about Mark. Won't you go after him?"

"I think I'll wait until he comes back," said

Hamilton, smiling, but so strangely, and with such gleaming eyes that Susy's causeless apprehension deepened.

There seemed to be something terrible in the air that she did not understand.

"Oh, please go," she said, putting her hand on his arm to urge him away. "Please go."

Hamilton laid his hand on hers, his whole frame shook, he smiled out of a ghastly pallor.

"No," he said, in a low, triumphant voice. "I'm going to stay until Mark comes back. We shall soon hear . . ."

. . . . . .

Mark went across the sand-hills with the simple purpose which Hamilton had spoken of on the surface of his mind. He took the gun down from the rack, saying to himself: "I'll go out and pot a few sea-gulls;" but deep down in his heart, too hideous to be brought out and clothed in words, was that other purpose which Hamilton suspected. He knew quite well that he was not going to shoot sea-gulls, but there are things a man cannot say, even to himself.

When he got down to the water, it was grey-black with a whitish surf, which gleamed, and went, and gleamed again, like a thousand-mouthed monster grinning at its prey. A chill wind droned across the sand-hills and flung a little gust of dry sand every now and then in Mark's face, as if the contempt of the world had crystallised; he drearily felt it to be right that his cheek should sting.

He had sold his son for a mess of pottage,

and the world thought he had sold his wife as well.

Now, if he lived, he would have to take away from Susy and the boy all that made life pleasant to them, and what could he give them in return?

Only a love that both could do without—he thought of Susy and Hamilton in the lamplight—that Susy could do so well without.

If he lived, what was there for Susy and her son?

Poverty, struggle, deterioration.

If he died— Hush, hardly let the thought come to a word even yet— If he were gone—what would happen?

His poor, muddled brain saw only one consequence of that; Susy and the boy would be safe—happy—provided for in some unthought-of fashion. He leaned implicitly upon Hamilton's strength even in this moment when he hated him.

Perhaps she and Hamilton would marry; for Susy was brave—she would not fear that stain of madness if she cared; and Mark knew now—he'd come to believe at last—that Hamilton loved Susy beyond all prudence or forethought.

Mark saw all that with the clearness which was as abnormal as the fog which hung about other subjects of thought, and which made him believe he saw everything as plainly as that one clear thought. That's where danger so often lies.

He stood in a hollow of the sand-hills where the ribbon-grass grew very stiff and tall; he could hear it rustling and whispering together as people did about him and Susy. And through the whisper

the Wolf crept, nearer and nearer still—nosing at the unguarded door of the House of Life—pushing in red eyes full of slaughter.

"I can't bear it!" panted Mark, half aloud.

That flung the door wide open, for those who listen long to the wolf-cry may have strength to *do*, but they lose their strength to bear; and bearing, not doing, is the final test of strength.

"What's the good?" Ah, the cry was so near now that it drowned every other sound, even every other memory. There was nothing in the whole dreary universe but the terrible cry of the Wolf.

'Why strive to bear when the wolf-cry fills all the future as it does the present, as it has the past?'

Thick darkness in the little House of Life that seemed only built on a myriad of other houses long destroyed and forgotten—no light to cast one gleam upon the watching God.

'What's the good—when the world's no worse because one more little House has been razed to the ground from which it came?'

'It's very place is in a breath forgotten.'

The Wolf crept near to the poor, unguarded soul, and darkness filled the world.

Mark raised his gun, which was unloaded, and put in a cartridge. A row of sea-mouths grinned out suddenly quite near to his feet, just at the bottom of the sand-hill. A man, falling, must fall into them.

. . . . . .

Susy could not see that line of surf from the window, only the dull water beyond, and Mark's figure was no longer to be distinguished, because he

stood on a further side of the sand-hill. Hamilton was just behind her, looking over her shoulder; she could almost feel his breath on her face.

"What's happening?" whispered Susy, full of that fear she did not understand. "What are we looking for? It seems as if we were expecting—expecting—"

"All this fuss because Mark's gone to shoot a few gulls in the close season," said Hamilton, smiling again. "You're growing fanciful."

A child's cry rang out above, as if he had wakened in a sudden fright. That gave the last strain to Susy's nerves, as any simple sound will do in a crisis. Susy flung open the window, and ran down the garden past the satyr that flung out its creepers in the breeze, catching her hair. Hamilton reached her just then, and held her. They could not see each other's faces, only a blur in the dusk.

"Go back!" he said, in a tone of command such as she had never heard from him before. "Go back, and I'll find your husband."

Steps cannot be heard on the sand-hills, and Hamilton went quickly along the path where Mark had gone before. His face was bent, and drops of sweat stood on his forehead as if from some intolerable pain. Quite suddenly he came upon Mark from behind.

He stood still.

The sea-wind turned the sweat to drops of ice on his forehead. He too heard the wolf-cry with most terrible nearness and distinctness. It paralysed his soul as it had done his body that night upon the

Russian steppes. That moment and this were alike in kind, but as different in degree, as agony of the soul is different to that of the body.

He waited, paralysed, silent, while Mark put that gleaming muzzle to his lips—just as he had lain motionless while the Wolf nosed at the open door of the hut.—

All that life could give if Mark were dead spread out before him in that breathing space as the past unrolls before a drowning man.

All the kingdoms of the earth—not the far-off ones, but the near-beloved kingdoms that he could see from the vantage-ground of an intensified perception—spread out before him then. How he'd reign a king with Susy, Susy, who would come to love him, for his dear queen. The dim sea and sky and sand-hills grew unsteady about him.

"What's the good of giving it all up? What's the good?" wailed the wolf-cry. "In a hundred years it'll be all the same, but you'll have had your day!"

Ah, the last argument of that dreadful Wolf Despair!

'A hundred years hence—it won't matter—'

He watched Mark put his hand to the trigger.

The wind lulled for a second to absolute stillness.

Then he heard Susy's voice in the garden, and love fanned once more that dying flame beneath the face of God. If she'd once been less than good—if she had ever consciously appealed to the bad in him—her voice would have brought some suggestion of it, and the flame would have been extinguished for ever.

But her real human goodness, full of faults, had the tremendous power now which it always has.

There was the sudden slip and thud as Hamilton rushed down the sand-hill—Mark's astonished cry—a loud report.

Mark stood upright, stupefied, dim-black against the dark waves with their grinning mouths, and it was Hamilton who lay bleeding on the sand.

Sounds came from the house, and the patter on gravel paths of running feet; Mark kneeled, trying to staunch a bleeding wound in Hamilton's chest. The waves with their grinning mouths touched him hungrily and retreated. The wounded man tried to raise himself.

"Lie still," said Mark, unable to do more than just kneel there, pressing the sodden handkerchief

He was past either thinking or acting, like one who has been suspended for a time over certain death and then brought back. The revulsion of feeling was far more horrible than anything that had gone before as the awful pains of an almost dead soul coming to life again are worse than any bodily agony.

"Mark," gasped Hamilton, but Mark stared before him, not hearing.

Hamilton, by an immense effort, managed to jerk his sleeve feebly.

"Mark, don't—tell—her."

"Who?" said Mark mechanically. "Tell who?"

"Susy!" He shut his eyes and fell back on the sand; only his tremendous will kept him from unconsciousness. "Don't tell her—you meant death.

Let her and everyone — think — *my* accident—my wish if I'm dying—Promise."

Mark did not speak.

"Promise," he repeated, with a groan of agony he could not suppress. "You've hurt me—you must. Do you—promise?"

"Yes," hesitated Mark.

Then Hamilton had to give in.

CHAPTER XXIII

"I SHALL stay with him to-night," said Dr. Walker curtly. "We'll wire for a specialist and nurse from London first thing in the morning. I shall have some idea whether there's any chance for him by then."

He had renewed his prejudice against "that Branscombe lot," and had his doubts, which he kept to himself as a good doctor should, though he was tempted to share them with Mrs. Walker. Shooting in April — at nine o'clock at night — and a wound in the chest—it didn't hang together.

Mark's face, out of which the brightness was blotted so entirely that it looked blanker than dull faces ever can, was not reassuring; no man need look like that—not sorry for another so much as without hope in life for himself—because his friend might die.

"You think he'll die," said Mark, stating the fact rather than asking the question.

Dr. Walker was not disposed to be tender.

"Touch and go," he said. "The worst is—he's sensible now, you know, and I don't think he wants to live much. That makes such a difference. A good deal depends on how his vitality is kept up, and he is letting it run down without a struggle. Poor

Hamilton, he's had everything, and somehow got nothing out of it. There's such irony too in that book of his—'Adam Hilarius'—making the world laugh and hold its sides; and here he is, glad enough to die at forty."

Mark watched the doctor out of the room and then sank down by the writing-table, his elbow touched the worn copy of Omar Khayyam which he had learned to appreciate through Hamilton. He must turn his thoughts for a moment or the pain of them would drive him mad, so with a sort of groan he opened the book and tried to fix his mind on the printed page. The monotonous beauty of the verses began to act like a soothing incantation, lulling the fierce agony into a gentle sense that nothing really mattered.

A cold shaft of grey light fell across him, and across the book in his hands; his face was pallid, and his roughened hair seemed to have lost its shine. His eyes were old as he glanced up at Susy when she entered the room.

"Well," she asked breathlessly, "what does the doctor say? I was with baby, keeping him quiet lest he should disturb Mr. Hamilton. I couldn't come before."

"Hamilton's going to die," said Mark, in a level voice, looking out at the sky. "He doesn't want to get better, it seems."

"But he must—he must; you must go and rouse him," said Susy. "Oh, Mark, how can you be so calm? You don't want him to die!"

Even as she spoke the words they struck home to

her perceptions with a terrible shock. She stood staring at Mark. What was that she had suggested? It was some horrible true thing she daren't realise—

Did Mark want Hamilton to die?

The thoughts thudded themselves out to the painful beatings of her heart.

The gun was Mark's. How had Hamilton got it? Why should such an accident happen?

The anxious look she bent on Mark changed slowly with her thoughts—grew fixed—deepened into a strained horror.

"Mark, tell me again how it happened."

He jumped up, letting the book fall with a clash to the floor.

"Damn you, I've told you once! Can't you leave me alone," he shouted.

"Hush, Mr. Hamilton'll hear," whispered Susy, recoiling. Mark to swear at her like that—Mark—her husband! Then the tension loosened and she began to feel a tender comprehension. Poor fellow, he was beside himself with anxiety, of course. How wicked and terrible of her to have thought— "Mark," she continued, "poor boy, I'm sorry I worried you. You've enough to bear without that—the horror of hearing the shot, and finding him—that's enough to unhinge anyone. We won't talk of it."

She forced that dreadful thought down into the hidden depths of her mind, and put her arms round her husband, sheltering and protecting him—making him feel he had one last refuge which could not fail: and there's a happiness in that which tempers the

worst sorrow to every husband and wife who love each other.

Mark kept his head buried in Susy's shoulder for a little while, then he burst out like some repentant school-boy.

"Oh, he mustn't die—he mustn't die!"

"He won't, Mark," soothed Susy, as dear women will, promising the moon if that will give a little comfort.

"If I could only—" began Mark. Then he had to stop because of his promise, though he longed to confess his weakness to her. But that was the only reparation he could make to Hamilton—to difficultly keep his promise of silence.

Susy bent over him.

"Mark—should we—do you care—to—to pray for him to live?" she hesitated, shy because she was speaking of her own prayers for the first time in her grown-up life.

"No," answered Mark, still hiding his face. "I haven't said my prayers for a long time, and I'm not going howling to God just on the off chance—because I'm frightened—"

"I wish you would," said Susy; "but don't if you'd rather not."

She slipped down on her knees beside him with her face hidden on his arm. It was very difficult to begin.

"Our Father which art in heaven," she whispered at last; and after repeating the Lord's prayer she could add nothing of her own, her lips would not make the words.

For a moment, Mark had the strangest sense of suddenly coming face to face with the Father. But, nobody can talk of such things to another, because they have to stay in the hushed place of silence where all sacred thoughts are kept, and he got up from his knees, saying carelessly:

"Well, it's time I was going off to see to those lambs in the Long Fallow. I told the shepherd I'd be there early to-day; don't wait if I'm not back for breakfast."

Susy rose too, and was very busy putting the table-cloth straight.

"The kettle is boiling, you must have a cup of tea before you go," she said, without looking at him.

So he drank some tea hastily and went out.

The rest of the day was so busy with the arrival of the doctor from London, and the two nurses, that the question in the bottom of Susy's mind lay dormant, with only a little faint stirring of fear above it to mark the place. But it was there all the time.

"How had the accident happened?"

Towards evening when the London doctor had gone after confirming Dr. Walker's opinion, and the nurses were settled into their usual position of armed neutrality with the domestic staff, Mrs. Walker came to inquire. Susy went down to see her, with the fear above that question moving like long grasses in a chill night breeze above a grave. Mrs. Walker was the outside world. What did it think about Hamilton's accident?

"It was so like Mr. Hamilton to be pottering about with a gun at night in April," said Mrs. Walker. "Always doing something different from everybody else. You don't—" she paused. How those grasses stirred! "You don't think he'd—he'd any intention?"

Susy drew a long breath.

"Of what?"

"Of taking his own life," said Mrs. Walker, in a low voice.

Somehow that idea had never occurred to Susy before.

"Oh, no," she cried at once, while beneath her words the thought took shape—"Then no one thinks it could be really an accident."

"Well," said Mrs. Walker, drawing her chair nearer, "I've sometimes fancied he feared the hereditary taint in the family so much that it made him half-mad already. I believe he might think he would end it all here, at the place he's liked best, rather than go into a voluntary exile that might do no good after all."

"He's a brave man," said Susy, with white lips. "He could have found that way out of his troubles long ago if he'd been a coward."

"They always bring it in temporary insanity," said Mrs. Walker vaguely. "They don't seem to think it's want of courage."

"I'm sure Mr. Hamilton never meant to kill himself," said Susy. "I should despise to my life's end any man who did. It's as bad as murder. You've no more right to destroy your own body

than anyone else's. In the old times they had a horror of suicide. They buried a man in my great-grandmother's time at the cross roads with a stake through his heart: Aunt Dimsdale told me about it when I was a little girl, and I always think of it when I pass the place. Oh, I should have an awful horror of anyone who tried to kill himself."

That terrible question, plain at last: Did Mark mean to shoot Hamilton? thrilled through Susy, making her talk as if to gain time. Then she lifted her eyes and saw Mark in the doorway with such a drawn face and miserable eyes that she jumped up, crying out:

"Is he worse?"

"No," said Mark, pulling himself together and greeting Mrs. Walker. "They all seem to think now that Hamilton would get well if he would make an effort." He paused for a moment. "Mrs. Dombey over again—Ha—ha—ha—ha!" and he went off into a paroxysm of uncontrollable laughter.

Mrs. Walker stared, then her experience as a doctor's wife came to her aid, and she poured out some brandy from the decanter that had been left on the sideboard.

"Here, drink that!" she said sternly, and gradually Mark became composed again. But within twenty-four hours he had strung himself up to commit suicide in a tumult of despairing jealousy —had been saved at the last moment, undergoing a most terrible revulsion of feeling—and now feared that the man who had given him everything was going to die through saving his life. The strain was

almost too great to bear, and when he stood in that doorway to overhear Susy say: "I should always have a horror of anyone who tried to kill himself," he broke down. It was just the last little more than he could stand.

When he was all right again to outward appearance, Mrs. Walker asked if Hamilton would like to see her. She still cherished a secret dream that she was The Woman in his Life; but Mark came back with the message that the invalid could see no one, and she went away through the dusk feeling herself surrounded by that vague halo of romance that a woman never ceases to desire.

"Susy," said Mark, when she had gone, "I want you to go up and see Hamilton. He's asked twice where you were, the nurse tells me. Go up, and beg and pray of him to get better. Say he must —he must. Say I'll do anything—keep anything—agree to anything—if he will only try to get well again. It matters more to me than you can guess. I can't tell—" He broke off. "Go now!" he said sharply, "don't waste another minute. It's everything to me whether he gets well or not."

He was so excited that he did not notice how Susy's eyes dilated as they rested on him.

"You've cared for Hamilton as much as that?" she said, in a low tone. Then the question tried to come up out of it's grave—horrible—into the light of day. "Mark, I must know how the accident happened."

Mark saw her eyes now, and the look in them. Youth went away from them both never to come

back again in that moment—they both grew up to the full estate of maturity.

"You must ask Hamilton. He has my promise to keep it from you," said Mark slowly. "Now go up. He is waiting for you. Tell him I wish you to know how he was hurt. And for all our sakes—yours, the boy's and mine—beg him to make an effort to get well. Beg as you wouldn't for salvation—as you never have for anything in all your life."

Susy opened her lips to speak, then closed them again and went to Hamilton.

The nurse stood outside his door.

"Oh, I'm glad you've come, Mrs. Branscombe," she said. "Mr. Hamilton wants to see you alone." Then she added on a lower tone, "Try to rouse him—that's his one chance—he'll do all right if his vitality lasts out. And don't mind if he wanders a little."

The door closed softly and Susy stood by Hamilton's bedside. The lights were shaded, and the pale, boldly-outlined face was dim against the white pillow, only the blue eyes reflected a little brightness.

Susy waited, afraid of saying too much or not enough; the emotional stress of the scene she was about to go through brought no pleasurable thrill to her as it would have done to a less healthy-minded woman; she was simply weighed down by it.

Hamilton let his eyes rest on her in silence for a moment or two.

"Well," he said then, "what is it, Susy."

His voice, half tender, half jesting, was so different

from what she expected that she gave a start and felt as if she were waking up from an unwholesome dream. This Hamilton was just the same; he couldn't be like this if anyone had tried— She did not finish that thought.

"You wanted to see me," she said gently.

"But not standing as if you were in a hurry to go," he said. "Sit down and look as if you were ready to remain forever. It is going to be my forever, so far as this life's concerned, you know, Susy. So you need not feel in a hurry."

"Hush!" cried she, "you must not talk like that —you *must* get better. That is what I've come to make you feel. You must get better."

He tried to turn a little towards her, but gave a groan under his breath and had to lie still.

"Why must I get better?" he said, rather faintly. "Give me that stuff in the glass there first, and then tell me."

Susy gave him the cordial, and stood looking down at him with her troubled, honest eyes.

"You must get better for Mark's sake," she said at last.

Hamilton was so revived by the cordial that he was able to smile.

"That's a reason," he answered slowly. "I'm to get better for Mark's sake. What makes you say that?"

"Mark told me it meant life and death to him," she urged. "He—" she paused—"he told me to ask you how the accident happened."

"Did he?" said Hamilton. Then there was a long

silence. Only the clock ticking and the ashes falling. Susy thought he must be going to sleep and turned to leave him, but he called her back.

"Mark told you to ask me? He wants you to know?"

"He has found that I shall never be satisfied without knowing," said Susy, gravely and earnestly. "I should always be wondering and imagining a thousand hateful things. I've got to know."

"I hadn't remembered that you would always be wondering and imagining; of course you've got to be satisfied," murmured Hamilton. "Wait; don't go. I must think how to tell you."

Again the clock ticking, the ashes falling. Susy always remembered those sounds as quite audible voices of suspense. "I saw *Mark* take the gun, you know, not you," she added under her breath.

"It was the purest accident," said Hamilton faintly, too confused and weak to think clearly. "Mark had the gun in his hand, and I came upon him suddenly over the sand-hill—there's no sound of footsteps on the sand, you know, and it was dark—that's all."

Susy came very close and leaned over him.

"That's not all," she whispered. "There's something more. Tell me."

It was her young, vital will against his flickering strength, but he fought until his mind was tired out and would wander back to that vivid moment on the sand-hills. He managed to raise himself an inch and spoke, no longer conscious of his words:

"Look—it's not the gulls—Mark's got the muzzle

at his mouth. In another second he'll be gone, and I—Susy—Saltmarsh—by God! I can't watch him shoot himself— A—ah!"

Then he lay like a log on the big wooden bedstead with the dull, red curtains, but his face was not more drawn or pallid than that bending over him.

"Wake up," said Susy, gripping his arm fiercely with both her own. "Wake up and tell me if that's true. Do you hear. You must come back, if you're dying, and tell me."

He moaned a little and opened his eyes, perhaps he had been slipping down the road to death.

"Is it true that Mark tried to commit suicide and that you saved him?" she insisted, calm now from the very excess of feeling.

Hamilton grew less death-like, and a faint surprise came into his face.

"Who told you that," he said feebly. "I asked Mark not to—I thought you would always be so unhappy—he ought not to have broken his word."

"He did not," said Susy. "You told me yourself just now." She had no care at all for Hamilton in that moment excepting as he affected Mark. "Oh, I see now why you must get well. If you don't—if you don't—he's a murderer!"

She sank down by the side of the bed because her knees would no longer support her.

"No one will—ever know," gasped Hamilton. "It was a pure accident—not Mark's fault at all—"

"But we shall know," said Susy, in a whisper that was oddly sibilant. "We shall know that

Mark—Mark killed you. Oh, don't let life slip away," she grasped his cold hand again, "keep hold of it—you must get well for his sake—and your own."

"For mine?" said Hamilton. "Ah, Susy, if you knew how glad I am to go."

She cast about desperately for a fresh argument, and in the kindness of the gaze fixed upon her she found it.

"You wouldn't like me to have a—a horror of your memory. To look back shuddering. There's something gruesome for all time about the grave of a murdered man. They say roses won't grow on it. You wouldn't like me to have that last thought of you."

"It wouldn't be murder," said Hamilton, most wearily, "Mark never meant it."

But Susy took no notice of his weariness. She was fighting for her husband's future.

"That won't matter to Mark," she urged, "if you die. He'll always feel—oh, I can't argue any more; but if you care for us at all, try to get better. We'll do anything. We'll stay with you here, or keep Saltmarsh for George, or do anything in the world if you'll only stay with us."

He was so weak and ill that it was more than he could bear.

"Susy," he half sobbed, "don't you know that I want to stay with you so much that I'd better go? Don't you know that I love you?"

Susy let go his hand as if it were unclean and stood upright.

"Then it's been true," she said slowly. "Then you'd have liked me for—your—fancy lady."

Hamilton — the old Hamilton she had always known—came back to her in the way he answered her.

"No, I haven't," he said. "I've wanted you for my wife and never tried to win you. That is going to be my excuse when I meet St. Peter at the gate." He paused a moment. "You won't beg me to remain at Saltmarsh now, will you? Even though I should try to live because I won't die to leave you a grave that—" he smiled a little—"that roses won't grow upon."

"I can beg you to remain at Saltmarsh, but not with us," said Susy rigidly. The clock ticked, the ashes fell, suddenly the pity of it all overwhelmed everything else. "I can't understand—it's such a tangle—why should it happen like this?" she cried out, her brave, gay faith in God and heaven faltering at last.

A look of wonderful, protecting tenderness came into Hamilton's face: he could not have her troubled so.

"Nonsense," he said, almost lightly, though his lips were bluish-white and his eyes held agony. "I shall get well, and all will be straightened out again. We'll go back and be just as we were before."

"We'll—try," said Susy, "if you'll only get well and be happy."

He smiled again. Susy remembered that smile after, as well as the ashes falling.

"Then it's agreed. I'll get well and be happy," he

said, humouring her as one would a tired, sorry child.

But oddly enough, as soon as the words were spoken, he felt there was truth in them: then he slipped back into unconsciousness.

. . . . . .

Susy went downstairs and paused outside the room where her husband was with a sick sensation of horror. She felt it was not Mark, her own dear familiar Mark, she was going to see, but some other in his shape. A man who had tried to take his own life. All her sane, inborn hatred of the act mingled with the traditions of her childhood and kept her there outside the door, not daring to go in. At last she heard a little stifled moan, and flung open the door: the sound went to her heart like the helpless cry of her baby.

"Well?" he said, all drawn and haggard with suspense. "You've been a terrible long time."

"He's going to get well," she said breathlessly.

"What has he told you?" asked Mark, not trying to come near her.

"Everything," answered Susy. "Oh, my poor boy.

"You'll always be thinking—remembering—" said he, with his humble, miserable eyes fixed on her.

"I'll remember nothing," cried Susy, running up to him, "but that you're my husband—and alive!"

. . . . . .

It was summer again when Hamilton came down for the first time into the long room facing the satyr and the North Sea. The morning sun shone full on the heavy mahogany furniture, which Susy's energetic rule had brought to such a state of high polish that the dull room was filled with a thousand

lights like an enchanted chamber. So it seemed to Hamilton as he lay back looking at everything, half with the physical pleasure a man must feel in coming back to life, and half with the exquisite regret of saying good-bye without bitterness to a familiar place. The mixture of those two sensations gave a wonder to the long room where Susy sat mending by the window, which would make him believe until he died that there was magic in the world. He would have, in that way, more than Mark or Susy; though they had satisfied love, and hope growing wings again, and the son whom he once coveted.

"I must have a business talk with Mark," said Hamilton reluctantly at last. "My time is getting so short that we must have things finally settled. Would you very much mind asking him to come to me?"

Susy rose with a smile, put away her work and went out. A full gleam of sun struck across her brown hair and candid eyes as she passed the table, so that she always remained the highest point of light when he afterwards went back in dreams to the enchanted chamber. In a few minutes Mark entered, his head bent with the sort of shame that he was unable to shake off in Hamilton's presence. Here was a man suffering for him. The sting of it gave him a mortal pain that no actual suffering could have produced; labouring already under a tremendous obligation, he was overwhelmed by this last gift of life at such a cost.

"Hope you're feeling better this morning," he

remarked uneasily, kicking the carpet. "Susy said you wanted to speak to me."

Hamilton rose slowly and walked to his old place beneath the picture. In spite of a certain feebleness of gait there had never been a stronger contrast between Mark's manner and his own; he stood, though his clothes sagged round his gaunt figure, with the finished dignity and repose that was so peculiarly a part of him.

"Look here, my dear fellow," he said, "we've simply got to be straight with each other—there's no other way. You told me yesterday you must clear out of this—get rid of all obligations to me that you could."

"I never said that," interposed Mark.

"You meant it," answered Hamilton, "and I quite see your point of view. Well, now for mine. To begin with—I love your wife."

"I'd begun to guess that at last," answered Mark bitterly, after a moment's astonished pause. "Can't you see how that makes the whole situation quite impossible?"

"On the contrary," said Hamilton, "we must start on that because everything else follows. Of course, as you know perfectly well, she has never even dreamed of caring for me, and I've only worshipped her as something apart. You believe me, don't you?"

There was quite a perceptible pause. Mark's head was not bent now, and he looked at Hamilton with a straight gaze as one standing on equal ground.

"Yes, I believe you," he said finally.

"And you love your wife beyond everything in the world—better than yourself, Branscombe?" pursued Hamilton.

"I suppose—oh, I'm not going to talk to anyone about my feeling for my wife," flung out Mark.

"We'll assume, then," said Hamilton, "that you and I place Mrs. Branscombe above and beyond every other earthly consideration. Now she is ready to remain here and to accede to my wishes as a sort of payment to me for saving your life. No great thing in one way—because any decent man would do the same for any other—but a very great thing in another way, because—"

"Because?" said Mark.

"I wanted you to die," said Hamilton.

There was a long silence after that.

"If I had Susy would be free now," muttered Mark. "The thought of what I owe to you will poison all my life."

"Your life!" cried Hamilton, towering over him. "I'm not thinking of your life, man, nor of mine, I'm thinking of hers. I want to make everything smooth and even for her."

"You thought so much of the boy once; you don't seem to mind about him now," said Mark.

"No, I don't," said Hamilton. "It was just an obsession. I must have what I couldn't have, so I took a make-believe. Futile enough, wasn't it? But I promised to be straight with you. We must make things right before I go."

"Ah!" cried Mark, "there it is—you needn't go—

don't go. Take back all you've given us. Let us and our boy go free."

"I'll relinquish my claims on your son," said Hamilton slowly, "but some return I must have. I saved you for your wife, and you want me to have nothing, not even the distant joy of knowing she is here and provided for, and relieved from all sordid cares. I thought, Branscombe, you would have been generous enough to know when to take, and that comes a deal harder than giving between men like you and me."

Mark paced up and down with his hands in his pockets, glancing every now and then at the man who was still obviously suffering through his fault.

"I can't do it, Hamilton," he said, suddenly pausing. "You put more on to me than I can stand."

Hamilton turned on him fiercely.

"Not more than you owe me."

"That's it; I owe you already so horribly too much," said Mark.

"Then, in common honesty you must give me some return," said Hamilton quickly.

"Anything but—" began Mark.

"Anything but what I want," said Hamilton. "Branscombe, it's not fair. You've got to keep up your end—to take your share. You *can't* get off scot free."

He spoke very wearily, and went back to his chair, quite spent with argument, his hands lay helplessly along the chair arms, but his spirit was beginning to dominate Mark's again as it had done in the past.

"A month to-day I shall be on the water," he said after a pause.

"You're not strong enough to leave," muttered Mark.

"That's it, I'm only just strong enough to leave, and I want you to help me," said Hamilton, with a great effort. "It'll make my going so much easier if I leave all well here. I couldn't bear to be uncertain —to not know how things were going with you— with her—it would be so dreadful to think of her wanting anything."

"You've no right," burst out Mark, "to think of her."

"I know," acquiesced Hamilton dully. "Well, now you understand."

There was a long pause, during which the two men stared gloomily before them. Then, as Mark watched Hamilton's drawn face, his old trust came back again.

"No," he cried on sudden impulse; "blest if I do understand! It's too big for me to understand, but I'll take my share."

CHAPTER XXIV

On a Sunday evening Hamilton leaned over the bulwarks of a ship which was not too large to feel the swell of the Atlantic, and he enjoyed the motion and the real sense of being at sea as those do who have grown up on the north-east coast of England. It was about sunset, and a group of young men had gone down into the second-class saloon for a sort of service. They were all from Yorkshire towns, and had belonged to chapels with such names as Fish Street and Ebenezer, where they had worshipped and attended class-meetings, and talked to each other about Canada afterwards, until they were bound to burst away from desk and bank counter and shop, and go forth into a world where there was room to spread. They wore horrible, gay ties, and suits of impossible pattern, and their manners were not good, but underneath all that thrilled a little of the spirit of the Pilgrim Fathers; the same sturdy faith in the future, and their power to meet it.

Hamilton walked along the deck until he was near enough to hear what they were saying through the open skylight—it was a still night and their voices carried—

"'Eternal Father, strong to save'—rotten tune that; try another. Now we did have some singing at

Fish Street. Bet you couldn't beat Bradford Road—"

Hamilton listened, and was vaguely disappointed as these scraps of talk floated up to him. The west grew less glorious—faded into grey. He shivered a little in the colder air, and now was the time for the wolf-cry to sound vaguely on the far edge of the sea. Not near enough to hurt or destroy because of the little light burning in his House of Life; but near enough to make him vaguely miserable as a distant howling will. What's the good? What's the good? Though faint in the sea-wind it was most distinct. Well, he had no answer ready. What *was* the good of going to a new land just to keep a sane body alive to accomodate a sane mind? Both were his own. He mattered vitally to nobody at all. What was the use?

Then a young man from the East Riding read the text above another hymn, and his strong, uncultivated drawl hit the ear-drum like a hammer.

"Number 823—'In my Father's house are many mansions.'"

Hamilton returned to his first watching place again where he could look across the darkening sea undisturbed. The gleam of intuition—the mysterious agency which no man can explain—had lighted the lamp, and this chance word poured oil upon it. My Father!

. . . . . .

A year or so later, on another Sunday, Miss Dimsdale sat in the little room behind the shop with an open parcel on her knee. Jim Pyne stood near,

looking at the contents with a mixture of puzzlement, and contempt.

"From Mr. Hamilton," said Miss Dimsdale. "Susy's sent them. She got a packet from him with a slip of paper inside telling what they were. 'Green corn,' it said, and he called it the first-fruits. Seems more of a man, from all accounts, than he ever was here. Some young chaps that went out with him from Lowport are working near him, and they tell he can do a day's labour to match anybody without turning a hair. Heartens them all up, it appears. Shouldn't have thought it likely."

"He'll have forgotten to be frightened of going crazy, with getting tired in the day and sleeping sound at night," responded Jim Pyne. "And I've heard tell he wrote a book that'd make a cat laugh; so he must have had it *in* him."

"No great goodness in making folks laugh," said Miss Dimsdale severely. "Any fool can do that."

Jim Pyne did not feel able to argue the matter out so he returned to the green corn.

"How shall you cook it?" he asked. "I expect you'll be having it for dinner to-day as Mr. and Mrs. Branscombe's coming."

"That's what I hailed you in to ask you," retorted Miss Dimsdale. "Susy might have said. How am I to know how to cook such outlandish-looking stuff? It's no more corn than you are. I think I'd better throw it away?"

She paused for advice, while Jim Pyne touched the green corn gingerly as if it might bite.

"No," he said, "Mr. Hamilton called it the first-

fruits, but it's more like a fruit than a vegetable. I should put it in a pie-dish with water and sugar and a short crust over it: then you have crust and syrup whatever happens."

"Well," said Miss Dimsdale, reaching for the pasteboard, "there are worse folks than you when anybody's in a fix."

He went out, beaming with gratification: that meant a good deal, coming from Miss Dimsdale.

Just beyond the threshold, leading into the garden he paused.

"If you and me was thirty years younger, my lass," he said, cocking his felt hat and winking an eye.

"I should give you a smack on the side of your head with this rolling-pin," replied Miss Dimsdale, with unexpected vigour.

That was better still. That sort of repartee took him back to Sundays a very long time ago when he was a gay fellow with the girls, and a threatened "clout on the side of the head" marked a distinct stage of pleasant intercourse. He cocked his hat still further and walked down the garden, very erect, whistling a tune. So we part with Jim Pyne.

The pastry was cooked a lovely golden brown, and the roast fowl ready, when Mark and Susy arrived with their little son, who began to talk now, and was, of course, the most wonderful son in all the world. Miss Dimsdale's wholesome severity quite deserted her when she entertained her great-nephew, and he did things unreproved for which Susy in her childhood would have been punished. Somehow this made her

care for Aunt Dimsdale more than all the care and protection which had been given to her own lonely childhood.

'There," she said, with a sort of triumphant gladness in her tone, "there's George playing with the spotted shell Uncle Henry sent you from sea. You would never let me touch it."

And they all three laughed as if this were the finest joke possible, while young George chuckled too, out of very sympathy.

After tea the nurse in the pony-cart came for young George, and he was driven back to Saltmarsh; then Susy turned up her sleeves, and put an apron over the fine silk gown which fell about her in those noble folds that suited her tall figure.

"Whatever are you going to do?" cried Miss Dimsdale.

"Help you to wash up," answered Susy, filling the bowl. "Now, glasses first; and I won't forget to polish them with a duster. Don't you remember how vexed you used to be when I forgot?"

"You should just hear young George imitate a railway train," said Mark, *à propos* of nothing. "I shouldn't wonder if he'd a taste for engineering, he's so keen on anything mechanical. I brought him a toy train home from Market Yarborough, and he ran it along the floor like a boy of ten."

"Yes; it was extraordinary," added Susy, with eager pride. "Of course we knew all mothers' geese are swans, but there is really something rather uncommon about little George."

After that Mark went out into the garden for a

smoke, and in half-an-hour or so, Susy joined him.

"How do you like green corn pie?" said Susy.

"It was a bit tough," said Mark.

Then they looked at each other, and laughed until the tears ran down.

"After all, I should have known no better when I lived in Suddaby," said Susy at last.

"I must write and tell Hamilton in my next letter," said Mark.

A tender gravity shadowed Susy's face; she glanced across the peaceful garden to the little houses clustering so homelike together, and the familiar tower of the church above the trees.

"I hope he is happy," she said; "what do you think?"

But Mark just took her arm and walked with her silently down the garden, because he could not find words to tell even her what he thought about Hamilton.

Then Miss Dimsdale called out from the door that it was time to go to church if they were going; she was already dressed in her best bonnet and black kid gloves. So they all three went down the village street together, while the neighbours glanced from low windows, no longer excited about an old story which had become a matter of course.

"There's Susy Drewery, as was, walking down the road in silks and satins, and she made me this very skirt I have on," one woman might remark to another, but only as she would refer to the invention of the telegraph, or the sale of Jones's mare for five hundred

pounds, or any other miraculous event which had become history.

At the church gate Mr. and Mrs. Farrow were alighting from their cart, and Mr. Farrow came up before his wife could get a word in, his face puckering with laughter.

"Glad to see you're not too proud to honour Suddaby Church," he said. "Expect the hassocks'll sit up and beg when you walk down the aisle—he! he! They're not used to being knelt on by a squire and his lady. We're all plain farming folks about here."

"Plain enough," said Miss Dimsdale, with meaning. "How do you do, Mrs. Farrow. You're husband's a rare one for his joke."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Farrow, smoothing her gown. "I get a bit too much of it sometimes, but it does make things cheerful at home, I must say—and he never goes too far like Jones does. What makes me think of Jones is that we passed their trap outside the 'Dog and Duck.' They'll be coming to church maybe."

"Church, not them," said Mr. Farrow, encouraged, "unless you can find one where they pass whisky round while the hymns are sung."

"You don't know," said his wife. "She's setting up for a quite grand body in Market Yarborough, and she's kept hold of the money. I heard of her at the Woman's Temperance Soirée a bit ago—my sister told me."

"They're coming," said Susy. "They're pulling up at the gate, with the boy from the 'Dog and

Duck' behind to take the horse. Shall we walk in, Mark?"

"No," said Mark. "I'm not going to run away from him."

There was a certain tenseness about the little group as Mr. and Mrs. Jones came down the gravel path, the lady's feather boa fluttering, and the flowers in her hat nodding with every step.

Mrs. Jones bowed stately and passed through into the church, but Jones paused.

"Hello, Farrow," he said, "how's the crops, eh? Mrs. Farrow, you look blooming. Why, its months since I've seen you, Miss Dimsdale; you get younger with time, I'm sure." He was making his way round the group to Mark and Susy, who stood rather stiff and silent. "Look here, Branscombe," he said, "we're in the church porch—a place where nobody wants to bear ill-feeling, I take it? Well, you and I differed about a matter I needn't go into now, but it was a misapprehension, and I apologise. There! a man can't do more than that, can he?"

"Don't you take his hand," whispered Miss Dimsdale fiercely. "It's all for his own ends. If you were poor he'd never think of apologising."

Mark hesitated a moment.

"All of us make mistakes sometimes, Mrs. Branscombe," urged Jones. "Won't you speak for me? After all, I did it mostly because I was so narked that you wouldn't have me."

Susy looked round at them all, and then at her husband.

"Mark, we've all made mistakes," she said. "Don't refuse to shake hands, please."

So Mark and Jones shook hands just as the parson began, "When the wicked man," and the little company went inside.

It was very pleasant there in the oak pew with the trees waving outside the unstained east window, and a distant sound of crows going home to roost through the open door. When the service ended it was quite dusk outside the church, and Miss Dimsdale could see only a faint blur for each face when Susy and Mark leaned from the trap to say farewell to her.

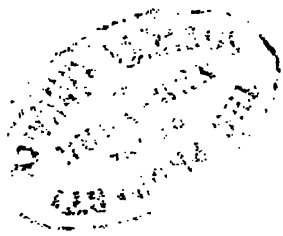
"Good-bye," she cried.

"Good-bye," they answered gaily back.

At the end of all happy days comes that wish for a happy eternity.

Good-bye.

God be with you.



THE END

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